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BANDERA BILL; or, Frio Frank to the Front.

A COMPANION TO "CHIOTA, THE CREEK."

BY "BUCKSKIN SAM"—Major Sam S. Hall,
AUTHOR OF "OLD ROCKY'S BOYEES," "GIANT GEORGE," ETC., ETC.



DOWNWARD, ON ITS COURSE, THE GLITTERING STEEL STARTED!

Bandera Bill;

OR,

Frio Frank to the Front.

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BY "BUCKSKIN SAM,"
(Major Sam S. Hall.)AUTHOR OF "FRIO FRED," "THE FIGHTING
TRIO," "THE RANCH RAIDERS,"
ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

GATHERING UP SCATTERED THREADS.

A QUARTER of a century ago, Castroville, Texas, consisted of but a few log dwellings, a blacksmith shop, and a grocery store, in which everything needed by rancheros was sold—it being also the post-office.

In fact, the town was but a collection of ranches, built together for mutual protection; there being no fences, and the cattle and horses of all ranging together. It was about twenty miles, in a bee-line, from the Bandera Hills, and there was but one ranch between them and the town mentioned. Indeed, this was the only ranch on the south side of the Rio Medina, with the exception of a little settlement, known as Bandera, which was in the hills, but not on the Medina.

The ranch referred to was situated in a horse-shoe bend of the river, about five miles below the Bandera Hills, and was owned by one Benjamin Bancroft, or "Old Ben Bancroft," as he was familiarly called, and the "locate," Bancroft's Ranch.

Castroville was on the Rio Medina, and is now quite a town.

Bancroft's Ranch, or at least the dwelling—both house and land being called "ranch"—was built fronting the entrance to the bend, but at some distance from the same; thus being entirely concealed from view from the prairies, except just opposite the entrance. The corrals were in an extensive natural "open," on the east side of the neck of the bend, and also hidden from view.

The dwelling consisted of two quite large apartments, an open space being between the same, and equal in size to either of the rooms. The roof covered this extensive passageway, which was used as a dining and sitting-room, also having hammocks hung, in which one could get the benefit of the cool breezes, which circulated freely through.

The sides and ends of the building were of huge oak logs, hewn on three sides, the outer side being rough. These logs were pierced with loop-holes, thus making the ranch as strong as a fort. A wide veranda extended along both front and rear, and some distance back was a log cook-house and an immense stone bake-oven.

Auntie Sue was the name of the old colored cook, and her son, Romeo, a bright little black boy, assisted her, when he was not engaged in hunting opossums and coons, he having a pack of ugly little scraggy "coon dogs," one of which, Chunk by name, was his chosen pet and favorite. This little darky was constantly in a dilapidated condition; his clothing being in rags from contact with the thorny undergrowth.

Old Ben Bancroft had two children—a son and daughter—both of whom had been at school in San Antonio; they having been on the ranch but a year at the time we introduce them to the reader.

The Apaches and Comanches nearly always proceeded down-country, between the Rio Frio and Rio Nueces, or along the line of bottom-land on either of these streams, and Ben Bancroft was aware of this fact when he located his ranch. But he was warned that the red marauders were liable, at any time, to advance down the Medina, especially if their spies discovered his stock. The rancho, however, had no fear of this.

As it was customary for war-parties to halt in their headlong gallops, after crossing the far-stretching plains that extended east of the Rio Pecos, and where they could securely secrete themselves, it appeared very reasonable to suppose some one of the marauding bands might follow the Medina, keeping within the timber, and even attack Castroville.

However, no hostiles had been near Bancroft Ranch, until the arrival of Lone Wolf's war-party within a few miles of it—the startling ex-

periences of the Bancroft family, and their friends, who will in good time be introduced to the reader, having been recorded in a preceding number of "Beadle's Half Dime Library," entitled "Chiota, the Creek." We now purpose presenting the same characters, as actors in another tragic drama, which we propose to give in detail; first giving the necessary points in connection with the events which had previously occurred.

Ben Bancroft was a jolly, good-natured, well-preserved man, of medium height and considerable strength. He was about fifty years old, with florid complexion, and hair sprinkled with gray.

He was possessed of considerable cattle and horses, as well as sheep; the latter being, most of the time, herded by Mexicans in the Bandera Hills. Six Texans were in his employ, as stockmen, or cowboys and two Mexican vaqueros; the cattle and horses ranging over the plains, south of the Rio Medina.

The old rancho had lived a very happy life, never having experienced any great grief, except at the time of his wife's death; and time had softened this, as years had passed since that bereavement.

Not until the events occurred that were detailed in "Chiota, the Creek,"—and which will be mentioned in brief—had Ben Bancroft known the torture of mind and heart, occasioned by the consciousness that his idolized daughter was in deadly peril.

This daughter was named Bertie, and she was the acknowledged beauty and belle of the Rio Medina; and her superior, in this connection, was not to be found, even in San Antonio, a city celebrated for its lovely maidens, of American, German, Spanish, and Mexican parentage.

Bertie was a sprightly and gay maiden, just budding into womanhood, her face being almost perfect, with Grecian profile, her eyes of a heavenly blue and her teeth like pearls. Her complexion was blonde, her lips nearly the color of a ruby, her cheeks like the prairie rose; and she had a wealth of wavy, silken hair, of a rich golden color.

Venus-like in form and face, was Bertie Bancroft.

Bertie had a mustang, a dark sorrel, the name of the animal being Colorado.

The rancho's son, William Bancroft, was at this time twenty-two years of age; and, although but a year on the ranch, was an expert with lasso, revolver, and rifle. He was a superb rider, and a fair trailer; having met in his hunts on the Bandera Hills, a young Texan named Frank Forbes, who had taught him much in connection with border life.

"Bandera Bill," as the rancho's son had dubbed William Bancroft from his being so often seen in the Bandera Hills, and Frio Frank, as Frank Forbes was called, became prairie pardos; and they were well matched, both being of magnificent physique, handsome in face, and with great muscular strength, combined with electric-like movements when occasion required.

The hair of both was brown and wavy, and hung low over their shoulders—Frio Frank's being several shades darker than that of Bandera Bill. They dressed nearly alike, and carried the same style of arms.

Buckskin breeches, fringed at the seams and ornamented with buttons, were thrust into the tops of their high boots, and woolen shirts of dark gray, with flowing collars, made up their attire—wide-brimmed sombreros being worn jauntily upon their well-shaped heads.

Their arms were Colt's carbines, a brace each of "six-shooters" of the same manufacture, army size, and bowie-knives.

Other friends had Bandera Bill met in the hills during his hunts. These were our friendly Creek chief, Chiota, and Dancing Fawn, his squaw.

Chiota was a noble specimen of his race, tall and magnificently proportioned, with great strength and marvelous agility.

His face was really handsome, his brow high and intelligent, as was the glance of his keen black eyes. These last had less depth of color than is usual among the Indians, indicating that he had white blood in his veins.

The Creek, in addition to his ordinary scant costume, went fully painted, his breast, arms and neck being umber, but striped with war-paint.

Bars of the same were upon his brow and cheeks, vermilion, white gypsum and narrow lines of black pigment being used.

He was usually armed with bow and arrows, a six-shooter, rifle and scalping-knife, and wore three eagle-feathers in his beaded fillet, which held, partly confined back of his ears, his long

black hair—the feathers being the insignia of a chief. He was a friend to the Texans, hating the Apaches with the most bitter and vengeful hatred for having slain his father and mother and driven away all his mustangs while he had been absent on a long hunt.

Dancing Fawn, his squaw, was a head less tall than her chief, finely formed, graceful and quick in movement, and, for an Indian woman, very handsome. Her hair was far from coarse, was very long and of a bon blue; her eyes being black, keen and piercing.

Chiota was a perfect terror, when ruled by the war-spirit of his people and a thirst for revenge, he being greatly feared, as he was very skillful at trailing, a fine shot, and as devoid of all fear as any human being could possibly be—in fact, daring to recklessness.

Neither Frio Frank, Chiota nor Dancing Fawn had ever been at Bancroft Ranch until the very day of the startling occurrences which will be made known in brief in this narrative.

Agreeably to the acceptance of an invitation from Bandera Bill to Bancroft Ranch, Chiota and his squaw had started down the river, arriving providentially, as the reader will admit.

Bertie had almost daily ridden her mustang, Colorado, up the Medina, for the purpose of catching fish or shooting small game, she having a small-bore rifle and a five-chambered revolver.

On this occasion—she never before having met with anything to alarm her—as she had, after catching some fish, advanced to the shore-end of a log upon which she had been standing, she perceived a huge moccasin snake coiled to spring upon her. She shrieked aloud, then became paralyzed with terror and unable to speak or move; standing half-bent, a horrible fascination rendering her powerless.

But, as the snake was about to spring, an arrow flew from an adjacent thicket, cutting off the head of the loathsome reptile.

Bertie climbed frantically up the bank and fell senseless, but in safety.

It had so happened that Chiota and Dancing Fawn had just arrived at an "open," on their way to visit Bancroft Ranch, and Chiota had rushed to the river, having heard Bertie's cry of alarm, shooting the snake; but, as his arrow left the bow, a signal of danger sounded from his squaw, and he rushed to her aid. Two revolver-shots sounded from the "open," or their camp, before he reached it. When he arrived, Red Wolf, an Apache spy, lay in front of Dancing Fawn, dying; he having attempted to capture the beautiful Creek squaw, and been shot by her.

Scarcely had the chief scalped Red Wolf when there came another scream from Bertie Bancroft, who had recovered, a huge black bear having approached her as she lay unconscious.

The poor girl remained still, and the bear moved toward her mustang, which broke rope, and stampeded away. The fierce brute then returned.

Bertie's shriek of terror brought Chiota, who, for the second time, saved her life.

At once, upon the shooting of Red Wolf, the Creek chief decided that there was a war-party of Apaches near at hand, and he was concerned in regard to the safety of the white squaw, whom he found to be the sister of Bandera Bill. He informed the maiden that he and Dancing Fawn were on their way to her home, by invitation of her brother, who was soon to arrive.

Not wishing Bertie to see the horrible corpse of the Apache, Chiota bade his squaw remain with her, while he went after their horses. Bidding the white maiden mount his steed, the chief then started them to the ranch, down the river.

Upon returning cautiously to the "open," he discovered two more Apaches standing beside the body of Red Wolf, and furious for revenge.

He remained secreted, until the red pair followed his trail to the point where he had left the carcass of the bear; where he sprung upon, slew, and scalped them both, leaving the corpses reclining upon the carcass. He then followed the trail of the three spies, whom he and his squaw had slain, and soon came upon six equipped mustangs. He then knew that three more Apaches were in the vicinity, and he was also confident that a war-party was near, and that they intended destroying Bancroft Ranch.

The Creek now feared for the safety of his squaw and Bertie, on account of the three remaining spies; but he resolved that he would follow the back trail of these spies, and inspect the war party.

As it chanced, Bandera Bill had, after Chiota

and Dancing Fawn had accepted his invitation, met Frio Frank in the hills, and induced him to visit Bancroft Ranch also.

Frank had never been to the home of his prairie pard, nor had he ever seen Bertie or her father.

The two young Texans started, but in a defile of the hills, they were "corraled" by the Apaches under Lone Wolf; and, although they killed eight braves, and wounded several more, they were reserved for torture! Lone Wolf then proceeded toward the ranch. The spies belonged to his party.

Chiota, following the trail, discovered the camp of Lone Wolf; and, to his utter amazement and concern, saw his white pards secured to trees.

By wonderful skill and strategy, the Creek chief succeeded in securing their horses and arms, releasing them, and himself stealing an Apache mustang. Then all made a dash, killing a number of the Indians, and stampeding their horses; after which our three friends started down the river toward Bancroft Ranch.

Meanwhile, the old ranchero, seated on his veranda, perceived the painted face of one of the Apache spies in the foliage, inspecting the ranch; and, as Bertie was absent beyond the usual hour, he frantically seized his rifle, and rushed like a maniac up the river, to her usual haunt. There he found the two scalpsless Apaches that Chiota had slain, reclining upon the carcass of the monster bear, which caused him to think his daughter indeed lost, and he fell senseless.

One of the spies had gone to the ranch. The other two, from hearing the revolver reports, as the Creek squaw shot Red Wolf, lay in wait for the supposed white hunter who had fired them. Instead, they discovered Dancing Fawn and Bertie, whom they lassoed from the branches of a tree; and being then joined by their comrade, who had so terrified the old ranchero, they proceeded, with their captives, to return to the camp of the war-party.

As Chiota, with Frank and Bill hastened down the river by way of the point where lay the scalped Apaches, Frank saw the glimmer of golden hair and a flaunting feather; and, being in the rear, quickly turned from the cow-path, Bill and the chief keeping on.

Frank Forbes had been half in love with Bertie Bancroft from her brother's having spoken so often, and in such glowing terms of her.

Chiota and Bill did not miss their pard until they arrived at the point where the former had twice saved the life of Bertie. There they found Bill's father, senseless, much to their astonishment and grief; they having believed that Bertie and Dancing Fawn had, by this time, reached the ranch.

Then they missed Frank, and immediately after heard a fusillade of revolver shots.

They believed that their pard had lingered, having discovered that some of the Apaches were following, that he had shot some of them, and that he was well able to take care of himself. They, therefore, after restoring the old ranchero to consciousness, proceeded homeward, greatly concerned by what the latter told them of the Apache spy whom he had seen at the ranch, and because of the non-arrival of Bertie and Dancing Fawn.

Frio Frank had, with caution, reached a point in the undergrowth that was favorable for observation, and by a grand dash had succeeded in shooting the three Apaches, and rescuing the captives. He then started, with them, for the ranch.

It was when Chiota and Bill were about to set out in search of them—the old ranchero being induced to remain, signal the cowboys, and put the dwelling in readiness for defense—that, around into the bend, dashed Frio Frank, Bertie, and Dancing Fawn, to the insane relief and delight of Old Ben Bancroft and his son, Bandera Bill.

The Creek chief, however, showed nothing in his face, of the thoughts that ruled him.

All were rejoiced beyond measure. The cowboys arrived to help guard the ranch. Auntie prepared a bountiful meal, and every one believed it to be doubtful if Lone Wolf, after losing so many braves, would attack the ranch; they, therefore, proceeded to enjoy themselves.

Chiota, Dancing Fawn, and Frio Frank are thus, at last, under the roof of their friend, Bandera Bill, and seated at the family board.

The father of Frank Forbes ranches it on the Rio Frio, and the young man is a skilled scout. Frank has also a beautiful sister, but William Bancroft has never visited Forbes Ranch, or seen any member of the family but his pard.

Having thus, in brief, given the reader an

idea of the circumstances and the startling dangers which brought our friends together, we will proceed; but we must beg leave to mention that the story which precedes this narrative is the first number of a series, each complete in itself, but the reader of one will become much better acquainted with the characters, and more interested, by perusing the story referred to.

Real life on the border, as it was in Texas a quarter of a century ago, is given in this series, in truthful detail and description.

The present story will prove how greatly our friends were mistaken, when they supposed that the most veneful and bloodthirsty Indian chief on the whole American continent—the hideous Lone Wolf—would, after being infuriated by the loss of so many of his braves, and having his captives taken from him, leave the vicinity without doing everything that lay in his power to slay, or recapture, his prisoners, and revenge himself upon Chiota and Dancing Fawn.

The Creek chief and his squaw were special objects of Lone Wolf's hatred and detestation, on account of their affiliating with the Texans.

CHAPTER II.

AT BANCROFT RANCH.

BANCROFT RANCH, from its immediate front, presented a very beautiful and striking scene on the evening upon which we open our story; and, considering the startling and tragic occurrences of the day, and the possible danger of an attack from the war-party, such were the relief and joy of all its inmates, that one would not have supposed they had, during the day, passed through such anxiety, anguish, and torture of both mind and body.

There were two of the party—Chiota and Dancing Fawn—whose frequent keen glances out from the open space, in the middle of which the table was spread for their meal, both north toward the swell of the bend, and south toward the entrance, proved that they were concerned in the safety of the ranch and of their white friends; that they were, as time passed, and they deliberated upon the position of affairs, far from being confident that Lone Wolf would, with his war-party, leave the vicinity. Indeed, they momentarily expected some startling indication of the presence of the terrible Apaches near the bend and ranch.

The old ranchero sat at the head of the table, Frank and Bertie at his right, Chiota and Dancing Fawn at his left, and Bandera Bill opposite his father. Auntie Sue and Romeo, with long-handled turkey-feather fans, stood, brushing away the flies, and disturbing the air about the heads of the party.

The Creek and his squaw, although their friends strove in every way to make them feel at home—indeed, offering them every civility and kindness possible—could not enjoy their meal; as never before had either of them sat at a table to eat, or on chairs.

Had they been squatted on the ground in the bottom-land, before their own camp-fire, with their simple meal before them, they would doubtless have done it justice; but such was their innate sense of politeness, and appreciation of the kindness and hospitality extended, that they both made an effort to do what they could.

But, the fact was, not one of the party could, for their lives, partake with their usual appetites; and it could not be wondered at after all that they had undergone through the day.

We do not propose to detail the conversation that occurred during the necessarily brief repast, for our object is to dwell upon the more startling and tragic experiences which, in this instance, did not cast their shadows before them; from the fact, perhaps, that none of them could believe they would so soon again be called upon to suffer more through the red torturers of the Rio Pecos.

Bandera Bill was the first to leave the table, and excuse himself and the Creeks; for he detected that this would be a relief to his red friends. Bill remarked:

"Please excuse us. Come, Chiota and Dancing Fawn! Father, we must have the cowboys eat at once, for vigilance is the word, and we know not what the night may bring forth. The chief and myself will keep a sharp lookout in front, while the boys satisfy their appetites."

"All right, my son!" returned Old Ben, rising; "I see you are on the alert, which is commendable, but I apprehend no danger."

"Certainly, after losing more than a score of their braves, the war-party will not dream of making an immediate attack. What think you, my red brother?"

"When moon roll in sky, mebbe so hear Apache war-cry. Lone Wolf heap mad. Want scalps, want captives for torture. Want horses. War-path open."

"We must act, and govern ourselves the same as if we knew the demons would attack the ranch," advised Frio Frank, decidedly. "Surely we have great responsibility upon us, to protect Miss Bertie from being again captured by those merciless fiends."

And Frank cast a loving glance at the fair girl by his side, as did her father.

The latter said quickly:

"You are right, Forbes! And I feel that this day's dangers and remarkable escapes should bind us all closely together. We must take every precaution against surprise."

Bandera Bill and the Creeks had strode to the front veranda, and the old ranchero arose from the table as he spoke—Frank and Bertie following his example.

The maiden, usually so talkative, seemed to have lost all desire to converse; but the expression of her face and eyes, spoke ten times deeper and more earnest than words could have done to Frio Frank.

Old Ben Bancroft, however, noticed nothing but what was to be expected—namely, a grateful feeling, born of her rescue.

The ranchero and Frank stepped out on the veranda, Bertie excusing herself and retiring to her own apartment.

Auntie Sue soon had the table cleared, and reset; a bountiful meal being placed upon it by herself and Romeo, and Bill directed the cowboys to eat at once.

The latter did not hesitate, but leaned their rifles against the logs, within easy grasp, and with appetites born of prairie air and a long fast, caused the viands to disappear in a remarkable manner, to the astonishment but pleasure of Auntie Sue, at this compliment to her cooking.

Dancing Fawn stole into the chamber of Bertie, and the two sat, side by side; the latter, while with her new-found red sister, not being backward in the way of conversing. An observer would have decided that the Creek squaw had been greatly impressed by Bertie, as in reality she had.

The old ranchero, Bill, Frank, and Chiota held a "council talk," as the chief termed it, on the veranda; the Creek continually sweeping the border of the timber with his eagle eyes, and his sense of listening strained to the utmost.

The day had been, indeed, an eventful one.

Was the night to be equally so?

None believed this possible, even should the ranch be attacked.

As the horses and mules had been driven in, and corraled, and most of the cattle as well, little apprehension was felt in connection with them; although the corrals were not within view from the dwelling, being screened by the dense undergrowth and the trees.

Everything having been put in order, in and around the ranch, there was little to talk about, except to form plans, in the event of this or that occurring during the coming night.

The chief, however, was not one to remain idle when a war-party of his hated enemies were so near, and he tightened his belt, obtained his revolver from Dancing Fawn—the weapon having been recovered from the corpse of one of the Apache spies slain by Frio Frank. Then Chiota asked, addressing the old ranchero:

"Where Apache look at ranch from tree?"

"Come, I'll show you, Chiota!"

Ben Bancroft walked hastily to the end of the veranda, from which he had discovered the paint-daubed face of the spy. Bill followed him.

The sun was setting, a huge blood-hued ball; its upper disk but just above the horizon line, and seeming to Bandera Bill typical of the sanguinary scenes of the past day.

The red rays found not their way into the timber-locked bend, but shot upward toward the zenith, softly blending with the blue. They cast a glow, that was weird and almost unnatural, amid the upper limbs and foliage of the timber, and over the bend, which was reflected brilliantly upon the naturally enameled leaves of the trees and vines.

Chiota stood gazing, but he noted nothing of this.

His black eyes shot keen glances ahead, as if piercing through the thick screen of foliage.

He held his carbine, the barrel resting in the hollow of his nude left arm, his right hand grasped about the small of the breech, and his thumb on the hammer.

"There," said the old ranchero, pointing straight ahead, midway between the ground and the tree-tops—"there is the very place where I discovered the hideous face of the Apache spy. I never in all my life was—"

A most startling interruption occurred at this instant.

As the word "was" left the old ranchero's lips, the same became rigid and his eyes started in dumfounded amazement; for, exactly in the same point at which he had, just before noon of the same day, perceived the Apache spy—as if his finger, thus pointed, had conjured up the very counterpart of the previous picture—the foliage rustled, and a hideously paint-daubed face, with black and snake-like blazing eyes, appeared.

An instant the trio saw this, so suggestive of destruction, torture and death.

The next, with the velocity of lightning the carbine of Chiota sprung to his bronzed shoulder, and a jet of flame spurted from the deadly tube. This was followed by a startling report, and this by a shriek from Bertie Bancroft.

Both sounds echoed in a strangely-blended manner amid the arches of the timber.

Then broke out a blood-curdling death-yell, and the form of the Apache spy shot, in the death spasms, out clear from the wall of verdure, whirling in contortions through the air, and striking with a sickening thud and cracking of bones upon the ground below.

"Waugh!" burst from the lips of the Creek chief, as he at once leaned his carbine against the logs, jerked his scalping-knife, and sprung from the veranda.

The next minute the scalp of the Apache was circling above the plumed head of Chiota, and the war-cry of his tribe sounded with exultant intonation, being repeated by Dancing Fawn.

"Great Crockett!" exclaimed Bandera Bill; while Frio Frank rushed from the opposite end of the veranda, where he had posted himself as guard, and stood near Bertie, his carbine cocked, and his eyes blazing in his astonishment and alarm.

"Heavens and earth!"

Thus cried the old ranchero, in the very extreme of amazement, blended with the deepest anxiety.

And well might he, and all at the ranch, be deeply apprehensive.

Proof positive lay before them that the war-party of Lone Wolf had not left the Rio Medina—proof, bloody proof.

CHAPTER III.

"WHEREFORE ART THOU ROMEO?"

LITTLE had any of our friends thought, as they sat around the dining-table, filled with gratitude that they were, after the dangers they had passed, again secure within the strong walls of Bancroft Ranch, that the startling events they had witnessed were but the first acts in a tragic drama, in which they were fated to become leading actors.

But the report of Chiota's carbine, the death-yell, and shriek of Bertie that followed, with their strangely-blended echoes, sent a chill through the blood of all, except the Creek chief and his squaw. For our white friends believed that the Apache horde, somewhere like two score in number, were within hearing, and that they would now be infuriated, and would dash in full force upon the ranch.

However, Bandera Bill and his father were so utterly dumfounded at the appearance of an Apache spy in the same place at which the other had been discovered by the old ranchero, that they were frozen in their tracks.

The cowboys had sprung from their seats at the table at once, upon hearing the report of the carbine, had clutched their rifles and rushed out upon the veranda, where stood Frank, Bertie and Dancing Fawn; while from the kitchen, her eyes bulging out in terror, dashed Auntie Sue, with Romeo close behind her, fully as frightened, and Chunk, its tail between its legs, at the heels of its little master.

Auntie Sue saw Bertie being led into her apartment, the large room that formed the east end of the building, and this, together with the expressions upon the faces of the men, increased the old cook's fright. Speechless, she bounded into the room in the rear of that of her young mistress, shooting head-foremost under the bed—Romeo and Chunk close after.

Poor Bertie was crying, and blinded by her tears, noticed neither the darkies nor the dog. The tears of her white sister and the cowardly actions of Sue and Romeo caused the young squaw much sorrow and impatience in connection with Bertie, and the utmost contempt in connection with the negroes.

Bertie Bancroft had been greatly enervated by the prostrating experiences of the day; indeed, she had gone through more terror and despair in a few minutes of the time than she could have believed she would be called upon to experience in her whole life. And now, she believed that another series of such horror was about to occur.

This thought, with the dread possibility of herself again becoming a captive to the merciless savages was more than the angelic maiden could well bear, and consequently she sobbed convulsively. Frio Frank was in an agony of apprehension, which feelings he had never before been called upon to suffer.

It was a thousand times more agonizing to realize that possibly the red fiends of Lone Wolf might again have his darling in their power, than to be bound himself, as he had so recently been, in the Apache camp, and expecting a terrible death by excruciating torture at any moment.

The sobs of Bertie coupled with the dread possibilities mentioned, racked Frio to the very soul.

As Chiota sprung upon the veranda, both the old ranchero and his son rushed along the same to the spot where stood Frio Frank and the cowboys; the Creek chief striding after, but casting frequent glances behind him, and listening intently.

"Stand ready, boys!" cried out Ben Bancroft, excitedly; "the red demons are upon us, and we must fight to the death, for a worse fate threatens us if we are captured!"

The cowboys clutched their carbines, and flashed suspicious glances in every direction.

"This just gets me back exceedingly," asserted Bandera Bill, wiping the perspiration from his forehead; "Chiota, do you think they will charge in on us?"

"Mebbe so hear war-cry when moon roll in sky. My white brothers, go in log lodge. Chiota, he look at trail Apache spy. He heap big fool. Young brave, want eagle-feather. No get eagle-feather. Lose scalp. He squaw, no brave. Waugh!"

The last word was ejaculated in the utmost contempt, as the Creek chief hung the trophy upon a nail, as though he thought it a disgrace to the other warriors to hang such a scalp at his belt with theirs. Then he added:

"Heap big fool. Stick head through leaves when sun shine."

One sweeping glance upon the faces of his white friends, and then, leaving his carbine with Bandera Bill, Chiota, with blood-stained knife in hand, ran like a deer across the lawn, quartering toward the timber. Soon he was close by the undergrowth. He then disappeared into the shades, but at some distance nearer to the entrance to the bend than the point where lay the corpse of the Apache spy.

"Chiota never loses his cunning for a moment," said Bandera Bill, admiringly. "He was, I think, quite positive that there was not another Indian near the lookout of the one he shot; yet he knew it would be acting the fool to dash in at that point."

"We all owe the brave and his daring chief our lives. But for his remarkable, indeed wonderful skill, all of us would be either dead, or awaiting a death of lingering torture."

"It is indeed so," said Frio Frank, "and we must rely upon Chiota now, more than upon ourselves. I am greatly amazed at the presence of that red spy. His death-howl made my blood run cold, and it still sounds in my ears like a warning of danger, if not of death."

"We must now act with quickness and decision, and just as if we knew, without doubt, that an attack was to be made to-night."

"That is a settled fact in my mind, pard Frank, since the instant I saw the face of that Apache. We have a horrible night before us—we may make up our minds to that."

"In Heaven's name, what more can we do?" demanded the old ranchero, rushing back and forth, in his great concern and alarm.

"Reckon hit 'ud be 'bout ther cheese ter send arter a few more fighters, Castroville-way," suggested one of the cowboys.

This man was an old borderer, and his words had always great force with the ranchero and his son Bill.

He was known as Marker Mose, from the fact that he would ride at full gallop after a calf, in the marking season, lean over in his saddle, clutch the animal by the neck, and with his knife, dexterously cut or clip the mark of his employer, and in like manner dash on to the next.

Marker Mose was attired, as were his "boy- et ready buckskin breeches, blue woolen

shirts, and sombreros with wide brims; all being armed with the inevitable "six shooter" and bowie—these belt d'aroud them—and each carrying a Colt's carbine.

"Who can we send? We can't spare a man," returned the old ranchero, quickly.

"Whar's Romeo? Ther little cuss 'u'd hev ter be lariatied onter ther critter, I reckon, er he'd slide off wi' pure skeer inter ther fu'st thick brush, whar he'd lay fer a sun er two."

"You're right, Mose! I'll look for him at once. He was nearly frightened out of his wits to-day, from seeing the Apaches capture poor Bertie and Dancing Fawn."

"Auntie Sue and Romeo are with Miss Bertie," said Frio Frank.

"An' I'm bettin' a moon's-last o' terbac thet Chunk war wi' ther leetle nig. He's a or'nary purp, but I sw'ar he do stick ter thet leetle darky pard o' his!"

Old Ben Bancroft rushed into his daughter's apartment, and began at once to quiet the poor girl's fears.

"There is not a man among us who will not die in his tracks, Bertie, before allowing you to come to harm. See Dancing Fawn! She would choose, I know, to be on the danger-trail with Chiota, rather than here."

"Cheer up, Bertie, my pet! Where is Romeo? He must ride to Castroville for assistance. Where is the little scamp?"

"I do not know, papa, dear!"

But the ranchero was twice answered, by the finger of Dancing Fawn, which pointed beneath the couch, and by the appearance of Chunk's scraggy head from behind the drapery.

"Come, Romeo!" exclaimed his master, "out of that! What are you hiding for? And, bless me, if there ain't Auntie Sue! Why, Auntie, I'm ashamed of you!"

"Out of that, I say—both of you! You musn't bother us with your foolish nonsense at such a time as this."

When the trembling little negro was upon his feet his master said:

"Now, brace up, Romeo, for our lives may depend upon you. You must ride headlong to Castroville, tell them the Apaches are here, and that I want help at once. Remember, will you?"

"For de Lor's sake, don't send my boy off from me, Mars' Ben!" pleaded Auntie Sue.

"Not a word, Auntie!" ordered the ranchero; "he'll be safer riding to Castroville than here, and you know it. Come on, Romeo, and let us have no fuss about it! Chunk will, of course, go with you."

Impatiently his master now led the little negro out on the veranda, where a horse stood, fully equipped, through Mose's forethought.

"Thank you, Mose," said his employer, as he placed Romeo in the saddle.

"Tie him fer ther critter," advised Marker Mose, "hit'll b' ther safest way."

This advice was at once acted upon.

Chunk was at the feet of the ranchero, endeavoring to spring upward to its terrified little master.

"Hyer's Chunk," said Mose; "I like ter fer-gut ther ugly varmint. Up he goes! An' I'll string him ter ther saddle by ther fore an' hind legs. Thar! Thet's all hunk Romeo."

"Don't forget what I told you," repeated the ranchero. "Tell them at Castroville to come to our assistance at once—that we are in great danger. Ride as if the old boy was 'after you."

"De good Lor' p'fect yer, Romeo, an' sen' yer back to yer ole mudder!" cried out Auntie Sue.

"Push through, boy! Much may depend upon the quick time you make," put in Bandera Bill. "You'll get there all safe, never fear!"

"Good-by, Romeo!" called out Bertie.

"Let her went!"

"Levant, leetle coon!"

"Make a blue streak fer Castroville!"

"Make ther rancheros dust out fer this locate speedy!"

The last speaker, Marker Mose, hit the mustang a hard blow with his quirt, and the animal shot up toward the entrance of the bend like an arrow.

Romeo sat bolt upright, his hands, as all noticed, although he clutched the bridle-reins with a desperate grip, resting upon Chunk; the cur being secured between the boy and the saddle-horn. It was now licking its master's hands, with a look that was half sympathy, half terror, in its bead-like eyes.

Auntie Sue retired with Bertie into the dwelling, upon the advice of Frio Frank. There sat Dancing Fawn, repairing some rents in her clothing, caused by the rough travel in the undergrowth when she was a captive.

It was fortunate, as will be shown, that the females did vanish from view.

Straight up to the entrance of the bend dashed the horse, upon which were bound Romeo and Chunk, when, to the utmost astonishment of all upon the veranda, in place of the horse turning east toward Castroville, the animal shot headlong, in terrific bounds toward the west, and up the border of the timber, in the direction of the Apache camp.

"Great Heavens!" burst from the lips of Bandera Bill. "Romeo is lost! His doom is sealed! In the name of mystery, what horse was that?"

"I'll bet my life it was the Apache mustang that Chiota stole in Lone Wolf's camp!" said Frio Frank, but in a guarded tone. "But I say, the women must not know this. Poor little Romeo! I'll saddle up, and run him down."

"Hold! For your life, hold!" spoke up the old ranchero. "Frank, you cannot leave the ranch—it would be madness!"

"You could not equip your horse, and overtake that animal within three miles, and then you would certainly be corraled. It has been a fearful—an awful mistake. Did you not know the horse, Mose?"

"Nary time! Hit war darkish, an' I tuck ther fu'st saddle-marked critter I kin to. Hit's too ormighty bad, I sw'ar; an' I'd like ter skate arter Romeo, dang me ef I wouldn't!"

"It is terrible!" muttered Frio Frank.

And not one was there in the party who would not have risked life to bring back the little negro, had their presence not been necessary to the safety of Bertie and the ranch.

A hush fell upon all.

The red glow faded in the west, but it gently kissed the ashen cheeks of little Romeo, and glittered in the eyes of Chunk, as the pair went speeding headlong towards the west, and the Apache camp, and—Death!

CHAPTER IV.

IN LONE WOLF'S CAMP.

THE camp of Lone Wolf's war-party was situated up the Rio Medina, about a mile from the point where Bertie Bancroft had been saved from being bitten by the venomous moccasin snake, by Chiota, the Creek, shooting off the reptile's head with an arrow.

The camp was within a large "open" in the timber, the western portion of which was, for a space, long and narrow, being quite free from undergrowth. It was from this spot that Frio Frank and Bandera Bill had been rescued by the Creek chief.

After the departure of our three friends, the Apache camp presented a most hellish scene.

Death-howls sounded, as did the monstrous death-chant of the dying braves.

Yells and whoops of fury, and the rallying shouts of Lone Wolf, now frantic at his losses, were also heard.

War-painted braves, most hideous and fiendish in appearance, rushed madly here and there; utterly demoralized; but something like a score bounded into the thickets, in pursuit of their affrighted mustangs.

As the animals had jerked up the stakes to which they had been secured while grazing, the neck-ropes dragging, in many instances getting tangled in the thickets, the warriors soon sprung free from the undergrowth on all sides, jerking the animals after them—some having two, and even three mustangs.

As the Apaches are "horse Indians," the reader may imagine the relief felt by them upon recovering their animals; they being hundreds of miles away from their villages, across the Rio Pecos, and thus would have been rendered almost helpless, and at the mercy of the Texans, if the mustangs had escaped.

The cunning Lone Wolf had, at one time, lost all the horses of his war-party by a stampede, and it was almost by a miracle that he reached his haunts, with but a few braves remaining alive. Since that time, he had been in the habit of ordering his warriors to stake their mustangs, in place of herding them.

A stronger guard was now placed over the camp, and six more spies were dispatched down the river, in search of those who had been previously sent, all of whom had been slain, as has been stated.

When this had been accomplished, the dead were placed to the west of the "open," there being some who had, when wounded, been crushed by the hoofs of our friends' horses, and also by the stampeding mustangs. The dead were placed feet to feet, lying as would the spokes of a wheel that is flat upon the ground.

During this time, Lone Wolf raged about the

camp like a wild beast. The worst thought of all was that he had been outwitted by the detested Creek chief.

Had he known that the Creek squaw had slain one of his bravest and most skillful warriors—that the same squaw had been captured by his spies, and with her a most lovely white maiden—that both of them had been rescued, and that all his first party of spies had been slain—had Lone Wolf known all this, his mad rage and vengeful fury would have been doubled; which, however, seemed impossible.

The Apache chief was naturally repulsive in appearance, but a terrible scar from temple to mouth, caused by a saber-cut, caused him to look much more hideous. This gratified him, and he refrained from putting war-paint on his scarred cheek, for the reason that it made him appear less horrible.

His hair was long, and coarse as that of a horse's tail. In front, it was cut even with his brows; a beaded fillet being upon his head, from which flaunted three eagle-feathers, which denoted that he was a chief.

Lone Wolf carried a revolver and a rifle, for he had been, previous to the time of which we write, to Washington, and to New York; and, in the latter city, was for a time with Barnum in the Old Museum.

Not having the remotest idea that a rescue would be attempted, for his spies had reported that no rangers, scouts, or rancheros were in the vicinity, Lone Wolf had laid aside his firearms, when feasting, at the time Chiota, Frank, and Bill made their dash for liberty.

He was expert, also, with the bow and arrow, and carried a quiver, bow and shield.

After the camp had been regulated to something approaching order, a signal-whoop drew all the warriors to that portion of the camp where lay the corpses of their comrade braves, and near which stood their chief, Lone Wolf, who had given the signal.

Each brave uttered an unearthly howl the instant the signal broke on the air, and at every few steps, as they approached, the howl was repeated.

Lone Wolf stood erect, his arms folded, his broad breast heaving with the volcano of fury and revenge therein, and his black eyes expressing the same emotion in a terrible degree. Had the dead been scalped, the rage of all would have been doubled; but the spirits of their dead comrades, they now felt assured, would be transported at once to the bright valley beyond the moon, where the grass is ever green, the rivers never run dry, game is plenty, and the horses are fleet as the wind.

They would have been held back in darkness had they lost their scalps, and gone stumbling, weak and hungry, along until their deaths had been avenged.

As it was, they had lost their lives on the war-path, the most honorable and meritorious death possible for an Apache; and this, in a measure, mitigated the grief of the survivors. But it lessened not, one iota, their thirst for and determination to have revenge.

Upon arriving near the slain the warriors, some thirty in number—these being free from guarding the camp, about half a score attending to this duty—ranged themselves in a circle, tomahawks and knives in hand. Thus they stood like grim demons, waiting the signal to spread death and desolation over the earth.

A dread sight it was, but it was nothing in comparison with that which was to come.

Two braves, with their shields serving as "tum-tums," squatted side by side, each having a short club; and as the hand of Lone Wolf circled over his head when the last brave had arrived making the circle complete, then in slow, funeral-like time began the beating of the clubs upon the shields.

At the first sound every brave bent forward, his arms extended, clutching his weapons.

At the second, all jumped upright, turning slightly to their left; and at each blow from the clubs on the shields a slight jump was made, the Indians with the clubs increasing the frequency of their blows. The braves kept time with their jumps, while the most dismal howls broke from their lips.

Faster and faster sounded the "tum-tums," and faster and faster the braves jumped.

This went on for some time, when all at once, as if each warrior had become suddenly paralyzed, the savage dance stopped, each retaining the position in which he happened to be at the time the signal sounded.

A moment after, a single whack at a "tum-tum" caused every brave in the circle to bound high in the air, all striking their feet upon the ground at the same time.

Then the eyes of all became fastened on the sightless orbs of the slain.

For a full minute the ring of warriors remained thus, as if the dead had suddenly deprived them of all power over their muscles.

An awful stillness ruled the camp at this time, a stillness that was most death-like; for every mustang had ceased to tear grass from the sod—the animals standing as if turned to stone.

It was a most impressive—ay, a most horrible spectacle!

Then followed something that was truly awful; for each brave began whispering, his eyes fixed upon the dead, as if informing the departed of some dread secret.

Then, in a few moments, three whoops, most vengeful, shot from each; their weapons cut the air, and around and around they bounded, stopping at a signal from their chief to gesticulate to the slain, and brandish their weapons wildly.

Thus they went on, performing a pantomime, which plainly indicated that the braves had all vowed to revenge the deaths of their comrades.

Then came another signal from Lone Wolf, the corpses were clutched, two braves to each one—one at the foot and the other at the head—and the funeral started to the south side of the camp; the "tum-tums" sounding again, slow and solemn.

Lone Wolf brought up the procession.

Soon a narrow wash-out was reached, in which the dead were placed; each with his arms, some food, his equipments and blankets.

Then the sides of the gully were caved in by the warriors, covering up from sight forever the braves that had been slain by Bandera Bill, Frio Frank and Chiota, the Creek.

CHAPTER V.

BREAKING UP CAMP.

GRIM and hideous, the Apache horde stood, in two semi-circles, around the gully, within which lay their dead.

It was at precisely the same time that the carbine of Chiota spurted fire, from the end of the veranda at Bancroft Ranch, the bullet piercing the breast of an Apache spy. The last rays of the setting sun fell aslant, between the lower limbs of the trees, and the undergrowth, upon the two crescent lines of savages, who stood silent and motionless as statues.

Thus they awaited, in superstitious awe, any manifestations from the spirits of their dead, which they believed to be hovering over the spot where lay the mangled tenements no longer controlled by them.

The faintest zephyr caused the leaves to move idly, and the long festoons of Spanish moss to sway slowly; a weird, whispering sound being perceptible, and which was believed, by the red braves, to be the murmurs of the spirits of their slain comrades, lingering before they took their flight to the Bright Valley, to ask their fellow warriors to avenge their deaths.

This continued for at least three minutes. Then Lone Wolf, who stood within the crescent, on the south side of the wash-out, pointed across the graves, and the braves around them strode across the gully. The chief then spoke, in a hoarse voice, not unlike the first threatening sounds that proceed from buffalo bulls, before rushing to conflict.

The appearance of the Apache leader was terrible, his manner and delivery impressive; in short, the whole picture their presented, in the semi-twilight, was fearful and unearthly.

"Warriors of the Pecos, open your ears! Listen to the words of your chief, Lone Wolf. Moon was small when ride mustangs from village. Moon now big. Apaches on Medina. Log-lodges of white dogs down river.

"Plenty, heap horses, mules, scalps. Plenty, heap captives for torture. It is good. War-trail open. War-cry on lips of Lone Wolf's warriors. Bad Spirit has been on trail of warriors of Pecos. Bad Spirit more strong than Good Spirit. Many braves sound death-howl.

"It is bad. Bad Spirit send Chiota on trail. Take captives from Lone Wolf. Chiota walk on trails with white dogs. Eat meat at log-lodges. Ugh!

"Lone Wolf hear. Want tear out heart of Chiota. Want drink blood of Chiota. Scalp of Chiota shall hang at Lone Wolf's belt. Chiota, he Creek. Apache hate Creek. Chiota die at torture-stake. Texan braves die at torture-stake. Kill many warriors of Pecos. Ugh!

"Spirits of dead braves whisper in air. Say Texanos must die. Say Chiota must die. Lone Wolf, he hear. Lone Wolf's warriors hear. It is good. Let spirits of dead braves go to Bright

Valley. Death-howl of Chiota, death-howls of Texanos shall sound on Medina when sun wake up. Come!"

This speech was delivered in a uniform tone, without the fierce yells, or wild brandishing of weapons usual at an address intended to instill the listeners with a desire for revenge; for this would have been considered as lacking in proper respect for the slain.

At the dying away of the impressive voice of their chief, the warriors uttered a low murmur of commendation. Then Lone Wolf jerked his long scalping-knife, hurling the same downward, the blade being buried, hilt-deep, in the great grave of the slain Apaches.

This was the signal for a like act on the part of each and every warrior about the gully, and immediately a score and a half of blades gleamed in the sanguine glow that glittered through the foliage.

The gleaming steel shot through the air—a rain of blades—and the huge grave was filled with the murderous weapons, the handles projecting upward. Then every one sprung forward, and clutched the handle of his knife with his right hand, the left being held upward, over his head.

Lone Wolf drew his blade from the earth, circled the glittering steel around his plumed head, then sprung across the gully, and strode toward the camp, his warriors imitating his every action, and all, in single file, following him.

Upon arriving at the camp, the braves formed a circle around a blood-stained post, that had been stripped of bark, and set in the ground, at the chief's order. This post had been rolled upon the sward, where their brother braves had fallen in the fight, and was smeared with their blood.

It was the war-post.

As the assembled Apaches gazed at it, their hideous faces became more demoniac in expression; hatred and fury flashing from their serpent-like eyes. All regret and grief at the loss of their brother braves had vanished, to give place to a thirst for revenge, for blood, and scalps.

The scene that followed was still more horrible.

Knives and tomahawks were clutched in the hands of all.

A terrific whoop of war shot from the lips of Lone Wolf, its echo sounding from each and every Apache. Then, high in air, bounded every one of the wide circle of braves, with weapons brandished, and cleaving the air around their heads; and, with whoop and yell most torturing to other ears than theirs, they circled around and around the war-post, with terrific bounds, which changed to rapid and spasmodic hops, every portion of their frames and faces contorting.

On went the horrid dance, half a dozen savages, by turns springing upward to the bloody post, and hacking and stabbing it with knives and hatchets, until the splinters flew on every side. This was accompanied with blood-chilling war-whoops and yells of rage and revenge.

At last a peculiar signal sounded from the Apache chief, and all dispersed to make ready for the continuation of the war-path toward the log-loges of the *diablo Texanos*.

Lone Wolf paced back and forth beneath the shades, in the "open," at times halting to listen intently, and gaze impatiently toward the point at which he expected the advent of the spies, who had last been dispatched down the timber of the Rio Medina.

But they came not in the way that he and his braves looked for them.

Indeed, a mad yell of fury greeted the returning spies, who now numbered five—one having gone to ascertain the location of the ranch, and he, as we know, had been shot by Chiota, the Creek.

The last party of the spies had been ordered to search for and bring back the first.

They had done so, but they had brought them back dead; three of them, including Red Wolf, being also scalpless.

Again vengeful yells rung out.

One glance now at Lone Wolf would have convinced our friends at Bancroft Ranch, that the Apache chief would continue his war-trail on down the Rio Medina, and that he would sacrifice another third of his braves, rather than return to the Rio Pecos, without having avenged the death of those already slain, and the humiliation imposed upon him by the defeated Creek chief.

The horrible scar on Lone Wolf's face was now livid. His paint-daubed breast heaved, and his fingers grasped convulsively the han-

dles of knives and tomahawks in his rage and fury.

This expression of passion was, however, of short duration, and was not betrayed to the eyes of any of his braves.

Again he paced back and forth to give vent to his fury, and continued thus until the spies upon their mustangs, with their ghastly burdens, were ranged in lines for his inspection.

It was evident then that the savage chief was forced to use his utmost strength of will, to refrain from springing upon him, and burying his knife in the heart of each.

"Speak!" he yelled, at length; "where is the log lodge of *diablo Texanos*? Where hides Chiota? Where hangs scalp of Red Wolf?"

Bounding Deer can lead his chief to the log-lodge. Red Elk, he go see. Scalps of our braves, of Red Wolf, hang on belt of Chiota.

Bounding Deer see trail. Know Creek chief trail. Know Creek squaw trail. Know Frio Frank trail. Frio Frank, he shoot so many our braves—holding up three fingers.

"Long Snake, White Bear, they take Creek squaw, take white squaw captive. Frio Frank, he ride from bush. Shoot fast. Kill all. Then take squaws to log-lodge. Mebbe so Red Elk, he come quick, tell where log-lodge. Bounding Deer, he bring dead braves. Think all lose scalp."

Pointing significantly toward the spot where the corpses of the other slain had been buried, and by a gesture directing a warrior near to guide Bounding Deer and the other spies thither, Lone Wolf called out:

"Go! Cover up braves. Bury quick. No time chant death-song. War-path open. Lone Wolf blood hot. Want scalps. Want torture Chiota. Want torture *diablo Texanos*."

Fifteen minutes after, the burying-party re-entered the camp, the watchful Lone Wolf detecting their return, instantly upon their emerging from the undergrowth.

By this time, the silvery moon illumined the earth, shining placidly down alike upon the infuriated, revengeful, and hideous Apaches, upon our anxious friends down the river at the bend, and kissing the ashen cheeks of the little negro lad, Romeo; its rays reflected in the eyes of Chunk, as the gaze of the trembling cur was upturned to its little master's face, in mingled wonder and terror.

The boy's fingers had been clutched amid the long hair of the dog, his eyes fixed ahead over the plain, and protruding with a horrible anticipation; while foam-flecked and panting, the Apache mustang dashed headlong toward the west.

His course was parallel with the timber-line of the Rio Medina, and toward the camp of his red master and equine comrades; bearing little Romeo along, as it seemed, to a fearful death.

A terrific yell burst from the throat of Lone Wolf, as the burying-party reappeared.

This was the signal for the war-trail. Immediately the Apache camp was the scene of bustle and confusion indescribable.

The hiss and crack of quirts, the snorting of mustangs, and the continuous thud of the hoofs of rearing, prancing, half-wild steeds upon the sward, were the prevailing sounds.

The rattle of arrows in the dry-hide quivers, the tinkle of trinkets amid the long hair, guttural ejaculations of anger and impatience, in both the Spanish and Apache languages—these sounds were added; while the glint of lance-points, flaunt of feathers, flutter of blankets, contorting of hideously painted visages, and plunging of furiously frantic mustangs, made up a picture, that was wild, savage, and terrible, to civilized eyes.

At the very moment that the Apache chief lashed his steed forward, to lead his braves into camp, crashing through the undergrowth from the direction of the prairie, dashed a foam-flecked and panting steed, with snort and squeal of delight.

In he sprung, amid the Apache horde; and seated upon the mustang, bound fast, was little Romeo, and with him, the dog Chunk!

The face of the negro lad was like that of the dead, his mouth agape, his eyes bulging, fixed, and staring upon the fearful sight before him.

Terror, the most deathly, was expressed in the poor boy's eyes, his face, and form; and his speech was paralyzed.

CHAPTER VI.

PREPARING FOR THE WORST.

"In Heaven's name, what is to be done?" demanded Old Ben Bancroft, in great excitement.

"Let us step to the end of the veranda, father," said Bandera Bill, in a low voice; "we must not allow Bertie and Auntie Sue to sus-

pect the danger Romeo has gotten himself into.

"Boys, keep a good lookout, front and rear; and one of you had better run up to the entrance of the bend, and ascertain if Romeo keeps on west, or enters the timber. His only chance for his life, is to take to the bush."

Before our friends, at some distance, but discernible in the gloom, lay a ghastly reminder of the dangers that threatened the ranch—the body of the Apache Spy!

"I see no possible way," continued Bill, "of preventing that poor little fellow from being captured. It was a great mistake for Marker Mose to make. The horse is as fleet as the wind, and I should have noticed the animal more particularly, had I not known that we have several of the same size and color."

"But what are we to do?" repeated the rancher.

"What have you to suggest, Frank?" asked Bandera Bill. "You appear very downcast and gloomy, and I never, even when we were captives, and a terrible death staring us in the face, noticed that you were in the least despairing."

"It is not on my own account, pard Bill, that I am gloomy and apprehensive; but I know these Apache devils, and I must own that I am very anxious just now. In my way of reasoning, Lone Wolf has no intention of abandoning the war-trail, even after his heavy losses. He cares nothing for his warriors, when his vengeful blood is up.

"He is a demon, in every sense of the word, and I fear we have a terrible night before us!"

"Merciful Heavens! What are we to do, to insure the safety of my daughter?" cried out the old rancher, in an agony of anguish.

The same question, Frio Frank was mentally asking, though in a slightly different form.

"Can we not have Bertie and Auntie Sue mount horses, and dash for Castroville?" asked Bill, the idea having just occurred to him.

"I should say, no!" answered Frank.

"Why?" demanded his pard.

"Because I think it very probable that Lone Wolf has sent a portion of his party down on the opposite side of the river, for the very purpose of cutting any one off, who may seek, in that way, to escape from the ranch."

"This is terrible," said Bandera Bill. "Where can Chiota be? We need his counsel now more than we ever did before."

"Rest assured he is doing us good service, in some way," was the confident reply of Frio Frank.

"We must do something, or I shall go mad," asserted the old rancher. "If you think Bertie will not be safe in the ranch in the event of an attack, we must think of some other plan, and that quickly."

"But, I tell you, it would be impossible for the red demons to break in the doors. We can shoot them down from the loop holes as fast as they may come."

"The Apaches are not fools," said Frank; "and they have already received a lesson that will teach them prudence. There is one great danger, Mr. Bancroft, that none of you—not even Chiota—seems to have thought of."

"What is that? What do you mean?"

"The most-to-be-dreaded danger of all—fire," answered Frank.

That one fearful word dashed the hopes of Bandera Bill and his father to the ground.

"Your house," continued Frio Frank, "has been built for two years. The shingles are of cedar, and are as dry as tinder. You may see then why I have had an anxious look from the very first."

"But, in the name of sense and mercy, why have you not mentioned this before?" demanded the old rancher.

"Because Chiota had gone, and I wished to confer with him in regard to what course we ought to pursue in this connection. But I have been thinking upon the subject ever since. We must defend the ranch to the last."

"The only plan I can think of is to secrete Miss Bertie and Auntie Sue in the branches of some large tree at some distance from the bend, equip our horses and lead them into the cook's cabin, closing and locking the door, and perhaps leaving one of the cowboys inside to let fly a shot at times."

"This is the only plan I can suggest. I think, indeed I am positive, that Chiota will agree with me. Dancing Fawn is equal in bravery and skill to a man, and she will, of course, accompany Miss Bertie."

"All that I fear for them is that Auntie Sue may cry out in her fright at the sounds of conflict, and thus betray their hiding-place to some lurking Apache."

"Your head is level, pard Frank," said Bill. "Your plan is excellent, and the only one that will approach safety to Bertie. As to poor old Sue, she will be too terrified at her position, and the dangers consequent upon discovery, to make an outcry. I am confident of this."

"What do you think of Frank's proposition, father?"

"He has removed a heavy load from my heart. Let us at once carry out that plan, which, I am sure, is the only one. I can fight, when I know there is a chance for Bertie to escape. But come; this must be done before any more spies reach the bend."

"It will be impossible," said Bandera Bill, "to get horses enough for all of us into the cook's cabin."

"We can get six in," asserted his father, "one each for us, Chiota, and two of the herders."

"Four animals must be equipped and secreted in the bottom-timber, near the ranch, for the other herders," directed Frank; "and three more for the women, in some distant thicket, should they be required."

"We do not know what may happen, and must be prepared of any emergency. Indeed, the reds may have already gotten in, east of the ranch; a possibility which does not seem to have occurred to Chiota."

"We must keep keen watch and be on our guard," said Bill. "But please go on, father, and attend to the horses. We will act at once. Come, Frank; we will join Bertie; but we must not betray too much anxiety and alarm. That would spoil all."

"All right, Bill; I am ready. Time flies. I only wish Chiota would return."

"I hope he will have some information when he does," was his pard's reply, as the two young men walked along the veranda; the old ranchero passing around to the rear, to give his orders to the cowboys in regard to the horses, as proposed by Frio Frank.

"If the Creek discovers the little negro on the plain he may endeavor to rescue him; but it is doubtful, for it would necessitate his abandoning us and the ranch at a very critical time. Here we are, pard!"

Thus saying, Frank, with Bill, entered the apartment, where stood Bertie, with old Sue and Dancing Fawn. The latter was still engaged in mending the rents in her costume, without the least indication in her face of apprehension or concern.

Bertie glanced at her brother and then at Frio Frank, her cheeks flushing, as she caught the admiring gaze of the latter.

Bandera Bill hesitated not a moment, but came at once to the point.

"Bertie, and you, Auntie Sue, both make ready to leave the ranch! Don't stop now to ask questions. We must secrete you both in a tree-top, where you will be safe, and I hope that Dancing Fawn will go with you, to protect and cheer you. What do you say, Dancing Fawn?"

"Dancing Fawn will go with white sister," replied the squaw, calmly.

Bertie and the old cook gazed from the face of Bill to that of Frank in open-mouthed wonder; but she spoke not, for her brother continued:

"We will, undoubtedly, be attacked by the Apaches during the night, and but for Frank, father and I would have believed it safe for you in the house. But he is positive the Apaches will shoot fire arrows upon the roof, and burn the ranch."

"This would force us all to rush outside, when we would be either slain or captured. We will secure our horses in Auntie Sue's cabin, and when the flames drive us out, we will rush there, mount, and make a dash for liberty and life."

"Your horses will be equipped and secreted in a thicket. We can reach them, and then speed to the tree where you are; making a stand, if the reds follow close, and protecting you in your flight down the river. Now I have explained everything."

"Be in haste, Bertie! Consider that the lives of all of us depend upon immediate action on your part. The sooner we can place you in a safe covert, the sooner we can assist father in the defense of our home."

"I will try to be brave," said the young girl, "and I know you would not leave us in a place where we would be liable to be discovered by the Indians. I have passed safely through so many dangers during the day, that I cannot help having faith that all will come out well in the end. I do hope and pray it may be so."

"Think of the narrow escapes we three have had! They have been really miraculous, and Chiota appears to be gifted with the skill and strength of a dozen men."

"Now, Auntie, don't say a word. You will only make matters worse, so do try and keep quiet. Dancing Fawn, I must thank you for consenting to go with us. Let us hope that you, and all of us, may be mercifully preserved this night, as we have been through the day."

"Are you quite ready, Dancing Fawn? That is right. Do, Auntie Sue, be as quick as you can!"

While Bertie Bancroft had been thus speaking, she had been preparing, as was old Sue, for passing the night in the tree-top; and Dancing Fawn, in her quiet way, was assisting them.

Both Bandera Bill and Frio Frank were agreeably surprised at the words and manner of Bertie; for it was apparent that by an almost superhuman power of the will, which William Bancroft had not thought his pretty sister possessed of, she had put away all the fearful apprehensions and torturing anxiety and terror that had been hers, in order that she might not hinder the brave defenders of her home and of herself.

In less than half an hour afterward, Bertie, Dancing Fawn, and Auntie Sue were secreted high up amid the huge, moss-draped branches of a monster tree—the young Texan having run lariat thickly from one limb to another, near the main trunk or stem. Over these blankets were spread.

This formed a roomy retreat for the three women, who were assisted up to it.

Thus far was Frio Frank's suggestion carried out, and as the young scout pressed the hand of the angelic girl, whose life he had that day saved and whose love he believed he had gained, he could not refrain from pressing his lips to her fair brow, although startled at his own presumption.

A slight pressure from Bertie's hand proved, however, that he had not offended past the hope of forgiveness.

Farewells were now whispered, and stealthily Bill and Frank departed; leaving behind them, in the tree-top, one, whom either of them would willingly die in protecting—the first, through a brother's love, as strong as it was remarkable; the second, from a love that filled his being to the very soul, and which to lose the return of he felt would plunge him deeper than any death—into the darkest, the most insane despair.

CHAPTER VII.

COMPANIONS IN TRIBULATION.

At the time that Chiota rescued Frio Frank and Bandera Bill from the Apaches, and the trio had made their grand and daring dash through the demoralized followers of Lone Wolf, and succeeded in stampeding the mustangs of the war-party—the infuriated chief had ordered the pursuit of the indomitable three; but, almost immediately he countermanded that order, realizing the impossibility of his braves accomplishing anything on foot, and directed his braves to rush after, and secure the affrighted animals.

Four young warriors, however, who had bounded away at the first order, continued on; although they doubtless heard it countermanded.

They followed the course of Chiota and the two young Texans, insanely anxious to win renown, by capturing one or all of the trio. To do this, they were willing to risk almost certain death themselves; for they knew, by the fury of Lone Wolf, that, did they bring back to their chief even one of the three, he who had been thus successful—although young and inexperienced on the war-path, and looked upon with something like contempt in consequence—would gain an eagle-feather. This was worth trying for.

As none of these young braves had ever taken a scalp, they were actually more to be dreaded, on account of their recklessness, than a skilled warrior, who knew the danger of facing Texans, and their fast-shooting guns.

In the fury and excitement that followed after the return of the mustangs, and even when stationing them, and during the funeral ceremonies that followed, the absence of these young braves was apparently unnoticed by Lone Wolf, and his rage was so intense that none of his warriors mentioned the absentees, believing them to have been slain by the Texans or the Creek chief.

Were this so, none felt, even had they known it to be a fact, like informing Lone Wolf, and if the latter did notice their absence he made neither comment nor inquiry. Perhaps he was secretly suspicious of their intentions, and pleased at their zeal, hoping that they might succeed, yet depending little if any, upon them.

Be this as it may, the four young braves, each jealous of the others' possible success to the extent of even reducing their chances of gaining a part of their object, and rendering their attempt much more desperate and dangerous, purposely separated, and without any verbal agreement to that effect. All proceeded through the bottom-timber for a long distance in great haste, and depending entirely upon their sense of hearing—it being impossible to see in the dense undergrowth.

Thus they lost all knowledge of the trail of their intended victims.

Eventually their consciousness of the foolishness of proceeding thus caused each one of them to inspect the undergrowth, from the edge of the bottom-timber to the river; but, as it happened, from different points.

The nature of the ground was such that the trail of a man on foot could not be distinguished in the shades, and the consequence was that two of these braves proceeded, half-bent, upon the trail of the mounted spies that had preceded them, although they well knew that those whom they pursued had not passed down the river on that trail.

They thought, however, that the trail of their unfortunate comrades would lead to the ranch, or its near vicinity, and that they might by strategy, secure a captive.

Neither of them was aware of the presence of the other, they being some two hundred yards apart.

On they went in the most cautious manner—bows in hand and arrows fitted to strings.

They were quick and active, sinewy and agile, keen of eye and ear, and they kept their senses strained to the utmost.

The other two struck the trail of our friends, the imprint of the iron-shod hoofs of the horses of Frio Frank and Bandera Bill proving this, and giving them the greatest satisfaction, filling their minds with possible renown and honors.

These two were also some distance apart, and neither of them knew aught of the other. Each of the four, therefore, believed that he had the advantage over the other three.

The first brave who was on the trail of his spy comrades, who had first proceeded down the river, reached the point where the animals had been secured, which had been discovered and taken away by the searching party that had followed those who had been slain.

Here the trail ended, but the young brave went on and by accident emerged in the "open," where Red Wolf had been shot by Dancing Fawn. He noticed the bloody sword, knew that he was at a point where one of the spies had been killed, and upon a slight search found the trail of Chiota and his squaw.

On the instant of his making this discovery, he heard the swish of a branch on his back trail, and believing that one of his comrades had come upon it—which, as we know, was the fact—he rushed into the undergrowth, and on toward the river; for the "sign" was plainly revealed.

As the river ran nearly due east at this point, and the sun was low in the heavens, the undergrowth beneath the towering timber was in twilight gloom; and it so happened, that the young brave who was in advance on the true trail of the trio all were in search of was about the same distance from the narrow, clear space where lay the carcass of a bear.

This brave also heard sounds behind him, which caused him also to decide that one of his comrades had discovered, and was following the trail. This belief incited him on, at full speed; both of the advance braves rushing, half bent, as fast as was possible, and not lose sight of the "sign," or cause undue disturbance of the bushes, to betray their presence to each other.

As the two trails entered the clear space mentioned, at a point but a few yards from each other, the consequence was that the two leading braves both came upon the carcass of the bear, where it lay in the comparatively light "open." Both thought the animal asleep. At once they sprung free from the bushes, with the intention of planting an arrow in the beast's vitals, before it should awaken and attack them.

The exit of each was at a spot as clear of bushes as could be selected, and both had practiced the greatest care in not disturbing the undergrowth.

The consequence was, that the two young braves bounded directly upon each other; and two more terrified and amazed Indians were probably not within the borders of the Lone Star State at that time. So sudden and unexpected was the violent collision, that neither of them had time to think of anything but defense.

It did not occur to them that they might be friends, and not enemies.

They clutched each other tightly, their bows and arrows having been dropped as useless, and neither of them having had time to draw his knife.

Over and over, in the gloom, the two rolled; and, as it happened, directly toward the river-bank. Over it they were precipitated, landing in the soft mud, directly upon the huge moccasin snake, the head of which had been shot off by Chiota, the Creek!

Life still remained in the body of the serpent, however, and its slimy coils squirmed beneath the bare flesh of the two braves. This produced in them the utmost terror. In fact, it chilled the very blood in their veins; for, from the snake being in the mud, they knew it was a moccasin, and from touch and movement that it was of large size.

Both had, at the instant of their rolling over the bank, recognized each other by the red glow upon the waters. Not perceiving that the moccasin was headless, they struggled as if in spasms. Releasing their clutch, they bounded upward, grasping at the bushes on the bank. Up this they clambered side by side, all covered with black mud and presenting a most ludicrous sight.

This was more especially so from their eyes being distended in terror, each expecting to feel the fangs of the moccasin snake in his leg at any moment.

The place where they had fallen, between the log from which Bertie Bancroft had often fished and the bank, was full of soft black mud; and the force of their fall, together with their struggles, had closed their mouths with this, covered up their war-paint, and filled their long hair. There is no doubt that each would have given a yell of terror upon becoming conscious of the presence of the serpent, had they not at once recognized each other and realized the ridicule that would be showered upon them by the other couple of young braves, who, they were positive, must be near at hand.

These would also betray them to the other warriors, and they would never hear the last of it.

It would be a burning disgrace to them through life—the mistaking of each other for foes, and then rolling together into the mud of the Rio Medina.

Two more miserable-looking objects it would have been hard to find, as they struggled desperately up the bank, in so doing unavoidably shaking the bushes vigorously.

But the mistake of the first two braves was destined to be repeated in part by the two that followed. Both these heard the commotion created by the other pair, and each thinking that one of his fellow-braves had succeeded in springing upon an enemy, who might slay their comrade, thus leaving an opening for himself to gain a scalp—each holding this suspicion and not caring if his comrade was slain, indeed wishing he would be—each rushed headlong from the undergrowth, striking each other with terrible force, and so overcome with amazement and terror that they were powerless to clutch and fight.

The force of the collision hurled them to the ground, but they scrambled, grunting, to a sitting posture, and recognized each other.

At that very instant, a movement among the bushes at the adjacent river-bank drew their attention, and they jerked their heads around the very moment that their two mud-smeared comrades struggled up the bank.

As a matter of course, it was impossible for them to recognize the two miserable black objects, as the two young braves, who had, in full war-paint, started out from Lone Wolf's camp, with proudly swelling breasts, and exultant at the thought of an opportunity to distinguish themselves.

In fact, their own mothers would not have recognized them, in the broad light of day.

So unnatural and horrible did these strange objects appear—so entirely unlooked for, and undreamed of—and coming, as they did, from the river—all this filled the two warriors who had been somewhat more fortunate, with superstitious terror.

Both sprung to their feet.

Just then, thinking their own comrades were about to shoot them, the mud-covered Apaches strove to cry out—a signal intended to prove their identity—but, from the mud being in their mouths, they were unable to utter anything but the most unearthly sounds, such as had never before greeted the ears of their terrified comrade braves.

Almost paralyzed with horror, these last

bounded down the narrow open space; but, in their previous haste, and the collision that had so quickly followed, they had not discovered the carcass of the bear. Both now fell over this, rolling upon each other with increased bewilderment and terror.

Once more the same unearthly sounds were heard, and they sprung upward, to see again the same two black objects, crawling clear above the bank, and toward them!

This was more than even savage nature could stand, although on the warm trail of an enemy. Both shot out yells of fright and horror, and tore through the undergrowth, toward Bancroft Ranch.

Had two of their hated white foes sprung up the river-bank, and toward them, at the same time and place as the black objects they had seen, these two young braves would have scorned to retreat a step, even though they knew certain death would be the penalty of their remaining. But the appearance of such objects, which they did not understand, and whose like they had never before beheld, coming from the river, was sufficient to banish bravery, daring, and all desire for renown or honors.

Indeed, escape was all that filled their minds.

But, had Lone Wolf appeared, bade them rise, and with words of praise and commendation, thrust an eagle-feather in the fillet of each, the mud-smeared warriors would not have been more elated, than when they saw their two comrades dash away in terror on beholding them.

Extreme mirth was entertained by them, as the affrighted pair fell over the bear's carcass, and then, with loud yells, shot into the undergrowth, and disappeared.

Thus, in spite of their miserable condition, felt the wretched-looking pair.

When they saw that their appearance so terrified their comrades, and that their attempts to yell increased that terror, they crawled forward, and repeated that attempt, with the result desired by them.

There was, however, no time for delay; and both, as if mutually influenced, rushed down the stream, to a point where it was deep, and where the bank was low. There they plunged into the water, retaining their grips upon the bush-tops, and soused under again and again, thus washing away the black mud from their hair, eyes, mouth and bodies.

Up to this time, since falling over the bank, they had been speechless; and, even after rinsing out the mud from their mouths, their words were few, and to the point:

"White Owl, he heap big fool," came from one, referring to himself.

"Beaver Tail, he heap big fool," echoed the other, also in self-condemnation.

"Swift Foot, Black Buzzard," asserted White Owl, "more heap big fools. Run fast, find Beaver Tail, find White Owl. Must find soon. Put on war-paint quick."

"Squaws point finger. Squaws laugh, spit in face of White Owl. Spit in face of Beaver Tail. No fight. Fall in mud. No think fight with enemy. Ugh! It is bad, heap bad."

"Swift Foot, Black Buzzard," spoke Beaver Tail, "no know White Owl, no know Beaver Tail, when all mud. It is good. Put on war-paint. Heap more good. Mebbe so laugh at Swift Foot, laugh at Black Buzzard."

"White Owl, Beaver Tail, say see bad spirits come from river. Say shoot bad spirits. Ugh! It is good."

White Owl extended his hand, and the pair shook, to bind their compact. This was a mutual oath of secrecy, neither of them considering that they might never again see Swift Foot or Black Buzzard; or, for that matter, any of their brother braves.

They then shook out the water from their long black hair, after the manner of dogs, and hastened, with great caution, through the undergrowth to the border of the timber, where there was sufficient to enable them to decorate each other with the stripes, bars, lines, and daubs of war.

Each then presented his usual appearance.

They kept out of view from any one who might be on the plain; but, before they again plunged deeper into the shades, they gazed down along the border of the timber toward the east.

Suddenly, out from the same, dashed little Romeo, upon the Apache mustang, with Chunk before him; the animal bearing them west, toward the camp of Lone Wolf.

The Apache braves were dumfounded.

They had never before seen a negro, little or big.

"Ugh!" grunted White Owl. "Face all mud, hands all mud. Ugh!"

"Ugh!" burst from Beaver Tail, in the utmost astonishment.

Then, a moment after, he said:

"No scare Lone Wolf. Lose scalp. It is good."

"It is good," echoed White Owl. "Come from ranch. Ranch there"—pointing down the line of timber.

"Come! War-trail open. Want scalp. Want captive. Want eagle-feathers."

The young braves, together, stole into the timber, more resolved, since their odd experiences than previously, to make renown and honor for themselves.

No jealousy would ever be entertained between those two again. Each would work for the advancement of the other with himself.

They were henceforth bound together by a tie far stronger than any other that is known to an Indian—that of mutual shame and mutual condemnation.

CHAPTER VIII.

BAD MEDICINE.

SWIFT FOOT and Black Buzzard, the two young braves, whom we have seen so terrified by the strange objects that crawled up the river-bank, were as much bound together, through their superstitious fears, as were the others by their mutual shame and self-condemnation.

So demoralized were they, however, that they had not the remotest idea which way they were hastening; they being bent only upon placing as much distance as possible between them and the bad spirits of the Rio Medina.

But they were brought suddenly to a halt, and to a realization that they were not far from enemies, by the report of Chiota's carbine, as he shot Red Elk, the spy.

Both instantly paused.

The two fearful-looking objects, they had beheld, were still fresh in their minds, and they cast frequent glances on their back trail.

They believed that the rifle had been fired, at the ranch of which they were in search.

Yet they dared not continue on in that direction.

They listened intently, and hearing the crawling of White Owl and Beaver Tail toward the margin of the timber, they thought the bad spirits were in search of them, and with increased terror, they proceeded to a new covert. But, as the shades grew darker, they made their way to the border of the timber, just in time to see Romeo dashing up along the timber-line, west, in the direction of their camp.

This increased their superstitious terror.

Here was another bad spirit, worse, if anything, in appearance, than those seen by them at the river-bank.

Like the other two braves, they had never seen a negro; and they now began to believe the Medina to be haunted by terrible shapes.

At another glance, however, they recognized the mustang, as the one stolen by Chiota; and then, observing the dog, they concluded that the rider must be a young brave of the Texans, who had painted his skin black.

Again they started forward, but they had not advanced a hundred yards, when, with a snake-like hiss, a lasso shot downward, the noose falling over the head of Swift Foot, and then down over one of his shoulders. The next moment, he was drawn upward, and hung between the tops of the undergrowth, and the lower branches of the trees.

His captor was none other than Chiota, the Creek, who quickly tied the rope to a limb, and with his knife between his teeth, slid down the rope, and dropped to the earth; keeping keen gaze upon Black Buzzard, who stood, as if petrified by this unexpected roping of his comrade, and—the sight of the much feared Creek chief.

But Black Buzzard knew that escape was impossible.

He, therefore, jerked his scalping-knife, and strove to get the advantage of his foe, as the latter dropped to the earth; the young brave being moved by the renown and rank he would gain, by bearing the scalp of the detested Chiota to Lone Wolf.

But he might as well have "bucked" against a cyclone, as the iron-nerved and steel-sinewed chief, who, with fierce bound and rapid play of steel, forced the blade of Black Buzzard from his hand by a stab in the wrist. The next moment, the young Apache lay, bound and helpless, writhing like a snake.

Then Chiota sprung upward, clutching the body of Swift Foot, and buried his knife in the brave's breast; preventing the death-howl by

drawing his blade across the throat of his victim.

Swift Foot was quickly scalped, and Black Buzzard effectually gagged; all having been accomplished in a very short space of time. Then the Creek chief stole into the bushes, and up the river.

Perhaps a half-hour had passed, when he reappeared with a heavy load upon his back—neither more nor less than the skin of the monster bear, and the huge headless moccasin snake.

Without a word, Chiota at once dexterously fitted the hide of the bear upon his captive, securing the same here and there with buckskin strings. The brave's head was entirely covered, effectually blinding him. He could neither see nor speak, and he presented a strange appearance indeed, but more like a bear than a man.

The Creek, to add to the horrid look of his masquerading victim, attached the scalp of Swift Foot upon the bear's skin, on top of the head, tied the still squirming snake around the neck, hung bow and quiver over the shoulders, and belted a knife, with paint and medicine bags, around the nondescript's waist.

There were sufficient air-holes for Black Buzzard to breathe, but with difficulty.

No more torturing position could he have been placed in, than when "made up" as a pawless black bear, by Chiota. It being quite warm, even in the bottom-timber, the perspiration poured from the Apache, beneath the bear-skin, which the chief had not been particular in flaying, leaving much of the fat upon it.

Chiota now forced the skin-inclosed Black Buzzard before him, through the timber, toward the ranch; but, before reaching the bend, he secreted the disguised Apache in a thicket, securing him to a sapling.

Having strong suspicions that other spies were in the vicinity, the Creek did not enter the bend, but retraced his steps; in order to discover any "sign" which would indicate the presence of the foe, although the shades of night were within the timber, and the silver moon was asserting its ascendancy above the tree-tops.

Surely the Fates, both merciful and merciless, seemed to be battling to retain their power of control over the actions, movements, and deeds of the red, white, and black human beings, who were within the timber that bordered the Rio Medina, at and in the vicinity of Bancroft Ranch.

First one side, and then the other gained control, and directed the thoughts, footsteps, and acts, of both the fierce Apaches and those whom they sought to destroy. But the merciful Fates seemed to hold the ascendancy; for the savages, thus far, were most certainly the losers, although the deaths of such a number were as nothing to the survivors, compared with the mental torture, the dread and anguish, suffered by the brave defenders of the ranch, as well as by the fair Bertie Bancroft, by Auntie Sue and Romeo.

White Owl and Beaver Tail, after putting on their war paint, and lingering a while to make sure that the black horseman was heading direct to their camp, proceeded stealthily along the verge of the undergrowth, but at such a distance within the shades as would insure them against discovery by any one galloping along the timber-line.

Although the death of Swift Foot and the capture of Black Buzzard occurred within a short distance of them, White Owl and Beaver Tail knew nothing of it. They, therefore, went on without much fear of enemies on their trail.

Chiota, however, saw evidences which caused him to be positive that there were still two Apaches skulking near the ranch, but the darkness prevented him from tracing them. They reached the border of the timber at the neck of the bend, about the time that Bandera Bill and Frio Frank were informing Bertie of their plans for her safety.

The Apaches now perceived the ranch, and their exultation was great indeed.

Quickly they crawled down within the shades to get a nearer view, and made their way to the very spot at which Red Elk had been shot by the Creek chief. As they peered forth from the foliage, they saw the scalpless and gory corpse lying before them.

Instinctively they drew back in horror.

Before them was a reminder of their own probable fate, when the recent overwhelming disasters to their war-party were considered.

Yet the thought of possible rank and renown spurred them on to use every sense and take every advantage that was open to them.

Their fiendish joy could hardly be restrained,

when they beheld the squaw of Chiota, the beautiful Bertie, and Auntie Sue, being conducted from the ranch to the timber; the young Texans, who were Lone Wolf's recent captives, being in charge of the females. These soon returned, proving, as no horses had been taken along, that the squaws had been secreted in the bottom-timber.

They also witnessed the placing of the horses in the cook's cabin.

There were not two more exultant and hopeful Apaches in Lone Wolf's war-party, than were White Owl and Beaver Tail, when they made the discoveries we have mentioned. They proceeded at once to penetrate further into the shades, and made their way to the swell in the bend; there to make careful search for the females, whom they had no doubt they could capture and carry in triumph to their camp, perhaps meeting their war-party on the way. Thus, they would have the honor, also, of guiding Lone Wolf to the ranch.

Chiota had tied up Black Buzzard, in the bear's skin, in a small open space which was almost walled in by an impenetrable belt of wild plum; and, as it happened, White Owl and Beaver Tail, in their course, struck the only point in this belt, through which one could pass without great trouble. Probably they would have avoided entering it, had not a fresh-broken twig met their view.

This was plain "sign" of the recent presence of some man or animal.

Bars and arrows of moonlight found their way down into the thicket, and the red pair entered quickly upon their hands and knees, supposing there was a passage ahead.

They had crawled but a few paces, however, when a violent rustling of branches and shaking of bushes caused them to jerk their heads to the right, and gaze, with dread apprehension, at the point of commotion.

The instant they did so, every muscle in their bodies became powerless to act, their eyes protruded in superstitious terror, as strongly marked as had been that of Swift Foot and Black Buzzard, when terrified at their exit from the mud of the Rio Medina.

There, before them, stood a thing of gigantic form, resembling a bear, but without any fore paws. It had long hair, like themselves, with a belt of paint and medicine-bags about its waist, and a writhing, bleeding, headless serpent coiled around its neck; while from its mouth issued at times sounds most horrible—sounds, such as they had never before heard!

The very hair on their heads seemed to crawl like squirming snakes, and the blood in their veins to curdle with terror.

Yet they could not cry out, or move.

Had they possessed the power to yell, they doubtless would; although knowing it would have been their death-signal.

The hind legs of the seeming bear were twice the length of that animal, which completed its monstrous appearance.

For full a minute did White Owl and Beaver Tail gaze in terror at this nondescript, or "What is it?" as if expecting it to advance and fall upon them.

Then they both sprung to their feet, as if each at the same instant had received a full charge from an electric battery; both shooting from the belt of bushes, and thence through the undergrowth, toward the river, as though they believed the unsightly monster—most certainly "Bad Medicine"—was at their heels.

CHAPTER IX.

ADVANCING ON THE RANCH.

UPON the return of Frio Frank and Bandera Bill from having secreted the women in the moss-draped tree, the young Texans found that the proposed plan in connection with the horses had been carried into effect.

The animals had been secured to hooks, the lassoes ready coiled and hung upon the same, to allow them to be slipped off and looped to the saddle-born in an instant of time. Everything needed upon a long prairie trail had been added. Thus did our friends endeavor to be prepared for any emergency.

The idea advanced by Frio Frank, that probably Lone Wolf had dispatched a portion of his war-party down the river on the north side, in order to cut off the flight of the people of the ranch to Castrovilla, was very reasonable; sufficiently so to cause all to abandon any thought of having the females make such an attempt.

The old rancho and Marker Mose worked with a will, as did also those of the cowboys not on guard.

One was stationed at the entrance of the bend on horseback, at such a distance as would enable

him to see up the river, along the line of timber westward, toward the Apache camp, and over the open plain as well.

On the prairie were the cattle; the animals, by the order of Marker Mose, having been driven east of the bend, where they were judged to be safe from the Apaches.

The three Mexicans were signaled to come to the ranch, and they were much relieved and pleased to do so.

It was thought by Frio Frank that it would be best to have but four men in each of the two apartments of the ranch. This would leave the three Mexicans and two of the cowboys to station themselves in the trees, or behind the corral pickets, and thus prevent the horses and mules from being stampeded.

This would leave one man to watch from the loop-holes on each side of the building.

As Frank and Bill passed through the open space of the dwelling to the front veranda, the old rancho met them. He seemed in great trepidation, and asked at once:

"Well, boys, how is it? I hope you have placed Bertie where she will be safe. But I know you have. I am compelled to believe we shall be attacked. However, all has been made favorable for defense. If necessary, we can rush to the horses and escape."

"And remember, father," said Bill, "we must be as cool and collected as possible—otherwise we shall be at a great disadvantage."

"I have loaned Dancing Fawn a revolver, and she knows how to use it; and she will use it, if necessity calls for it. Has not Chiota returned?"

"I have not seen him, and I think his protracted absence strange," said the rancho.

"He would not remain away," asserted Frank, "if there was not good reason for it. I am confident there must be other red spies in the vicinity, and the Creek has got trace of them. I only hope no savage eyes were peering through the foliage when we escorted Miss Bertie to her hiding-place."

"Great Heavens, Frank!" exclaimed Bandera Bill, "don't speak of such a possibility."

"If I thought it was possible," was the reply, "I'd take every man to the tree, and let the ranch go to thunder!"

Perhaps the intense feeling and evident earnestness of Frio Frank, at that moment, set the old rancho to thinking of the apparently very warm friendship that had been manifested between Frank and Bertie since they returned to the ranch together.

"There come the Mexicans! Now we are all right," said Frank quickly, wishing to detract the gaze of the rancho from himself. "Not that I count much on their fighting qualities, but they can shoot and make a noise, if nothing more."

Down, galloping into the bend, dashed the three Greaser *vaqueros*, fear stamped upon their swarthy faces, and their black eyes scanning the shades.

There are no words that can cause more terror and despair in a Mexican town than the cry of "Los Apaches!" or "Los Comanches!"

The men as a general thing when these words are shrieked, deserting their wives and children and fleeing for their lives.

Frio Frank well knew that the *vaqueros* could not be depended upon in the mad charge of the Indians upon the dwelling if they were stationed within it. He therefore advocated their being posted in the trees around the corrals, where they would feel safer, and at the same time do some execution with their carbines.

Consequently they were thus placed after an ample supply of food and water were supplied them, two of the cowboys who were brave and fearless to recklessness, being detailed to go with the Greasers, and to do all in their power to prevent a stampede of the horses and mules.

The old rancho and his son were almost stupefied at the thought of what might possibly happen during the long night that was before them; but an ejaculation from Frank caused both Bill and his father to start from their reveries and gaze at him in questioning surprise. It was only a glance, for they saw at once that the young Texan's eyes were fixed upon the timber in the direction of the corpse of the Apache spy.

"Merciful Heaven! what is that?" came from the rancho's lips in extreme anxiety and wonder.

"Yes, what is it?" repeated Bandera Bill.

"I am in the same state of curiosity and ignorance," was Frio Frank's reply. "Come on, and let us investigate! I should judge that Chiota had been bear-hunting, but that is the strangest specimen of the Bruin family I ever

beheld. I wonder what comes next on the programme."

It was not strange that the three men on the veranda should stand in perplexed amazement, for they beheld the Creek chief, with the nondescript—the wonderfully "made-up" Black Buzzard.

Chiota was pushing and beating his strangely attired captive toward the dwelling. As it was too high a place at the end of the veranda to hope to get the gigantic, horrible object there without lifting it, the chief pushed it to the front; but before doing so, he said:

"Let my white brothers shut door in log-lodge. Chiota no want Bertie see bad sight. Heap scare Bertie. Ugh!"

So saying, the Creek gave the monstrosity a whack with his club as it stumbled against him.

"Bertie is not at the ranch, Chiota. We will explain to you," returned Bill, "but, Great Crockett! what have you there?"

"Too much heap talk. Open eyes. Then look. Heap bear-skin. Little scalp. Little snake. Chiota make Apache brave bring all to ranch."

"Great Caesar! So he has an Apache inside that museum of natural history," exclaimed Frank.

"Same snake try bite Bertie. Chiota shoot head off. Scalp, Chiota take off Apache head."

"Well, I'm blessed!" was the remark of Bandera Bill.

"Where Bertie?" demanded the Creek. "Bertie no in log-lodge. My white brothers heap big fools."

Bill stepped up to his red pard, and explained the situation of the ranch.

"We thought Bertie would not be safe here, Chiota. Look!" pointing toward the branches where the red spy had lurked. "The Apaches may shoot fire-arrows upon the roof, and then we must rush out. What then could Bertie do?"

"She and the old cook are concealed in a big oak near the river, and Dancing Fawn is with them."

"Good!" returned the chief. "Chiota, he fool. My white brothers cunning warriors. Chiota no think of fire. More Apaches in woods. Mebbe so find big tree, find squaws. Dancing Fawn, she squaw, she warrior too. Dancing Fawn kill Apache when climb tree. It is good."

Black Buzzard was now forced to a standing position, and then pushed into the west apartment, where he fell upon the floor, a dread, loathsome, writhing object, filling the room with spasmodic efforts to breathe, amid the fatty skin that covered both mouth and nostrils—there being but little space between the fastened edges of the hide for air to enter.

The Creek was now asked if he had seen Romeo, and the question caused in him great wonder, as he replied in the negative. But, when he was told the circumstances of the departure of the little negro, and the direction taken, Chiota was astounded, although his emotions were not visible upon his face.

"Lone Wolf, he torture Romeo. Kill, scalp. It is bad. Ugh!"

A piercing yell now shot through the bend, causing all to grip their carbines, and stand on the defensive; ejaculations of alarm bursting from the lips of the whites.

But Chiota stood, proudly poised, his eagle-feathers flaunting, and the war-spirit of his people flashing in his black eyes; as his whoop of war sounded, like an echo to the yell; for, well the Creek chief knew the signification of that sound.

All gazed toward the south, from which direction the yell had proceeded.

That which they saw, told plainly what must soon follow.

The mounted cowboy, who had been posted at the entrance to the bend, and at a point clear of the same, from which he could see afar, up and down, along the line of timber on the open plain, and also afar down the southern prairie, was now coming like the wind, toward the ranch, and circling his sombrero around his head as he galloped.

All knew that the crisis approached.

Lone Wolf, at the head of two score of his merciless, murderous torturers, was dashing, in open view, down the line of timber, toward the bend, and Bancroft Ranch!

It needed not the loudly yelled words of the cowboys, to tell them this.

Well they knew his evil tidings!

"Ther 'Pache devils is comin', on ther hum! Ther hellyuns is comin', on a cyclone stomped!"

The cowboy was directed to secrete his horse

with those that had been equipped, and led into a thicket, for the use of his pards, should they be forced to flee for their lives from the expected flames.

He was then to return to the defense of the ranch.

Chiota, Bandera Bill, and Frio Frank, at once sprung up from the veranda, and bounded toward the entrance of the bend.

Soon they stood where they could gain a view to the west.

Then, a terrible sight was before them!

On, at headlong speed toward them, on the bright, moon-illuminated plain, sped the Apache horde; feathers flaunting, long hair flying, and the glint of silver ornaments plainly to be seen.

Plainly discerned too, were the wildly up-circling arms, that plied the torturing quirts, as they urged their half-wild mustangs onward.

Onward, for revenge, for blood, for scalps, and for captives for the torture-stake!

CHAPTER X.

WAITING FOR THE WORST.

"THERE the red fiends are, sure enough," said Bandera Bill, "and they mean business."

"You're right, pard," returned Frio Frank; but I'm betting high figures this is the last gallop many of them will take. How many have we killed, in the timber, between here and their camp, Chiota?"

"Dancing Fawn, she shoot Red Wolf."

"That's one," tallied Frank.

"Chiota kill so many"—holding up two fingers—"Lay on bear."

"That is three."

"Frio Frank, he kill so many"—three fingers—"when save Bertie, save Dancing Fawn."

"So I did! That foots up six."

"Chiota shoot spy from tree."

"Good! Seven."

"Chiota, lasso Apache, then kill with knife, when capture him in bear-skin. That all."

"Just eight," said Frank; "nine, with that beauty in the bear-skin. Nine this side of the camp, eight in the camp, and thirteen in the hills—in all, just thirty, gone on the 'long dark trail.' And, I believe there are about forty of those fiends coming. I wish we could count them, and know exactly; then we might be able to say whether any are lurking in the timber."

"Know now," said Chiota, quickly.

"Well, speak!"

"So many"—and the chief held up two of his fingers again.

"What makes you so positive? How do you know this, Chiota?" inquired Frank.

"Chiota got eyes. Eyes sharp. See sign. Sign talk plain. Night come. Chiota no follow trail. Chiota, he not owl."

"I say, Bill, we must go and ascertain if they are all safe in the tree. I can't bear this suspense and anxiety."

"Bertie, she safe," asserted the chief, confidently. "Apache no find. Apache find Dancing Fawn, she kill Apache."

"I know the skulkers can't find them, unless they saw us when we left the ranch with them," said Bill. "Don't worry, Frank. I am more anxious in regard to poor Romeo. I fear the little fellow is dead—cut to pieces by those demons!"

"But, come; we must 'git up and git,' pards, for the Apaches have covered a good deal of ground. We're all fixed for them, but we'd better be at our stations, and barricade the doors."

"Bill talk heap good. Come!" agreed the Creek, wheeling in his tracks, and striding toward the ranch; the two young Texans following, but with no great haste.

A minute after, however, Frank and Bill were bounding toward the dwelling, with every muscle strained, to increase their already great speed. But this was through no fear of the Apaches.

What caused them to run?

It was a yell of intense anguish and despair! The sound came from the lips of the old ranchero.

In a few moments, the trio were upon the veranda, and there beheld a sight that spoke but too plainly.

Before reaching the house, Bill and Frank, as well as Chiota, had decided that the lurking spies, whose trail the Creek had detected, had discovered the females, and that Bertie, Dancing Fawn, and Auntie Sue had been captured.

As they sprung upon the veranda, the chief knew that his squaw was in the power of the Apaches. His companions, also, were but too

well satisfied that the beautiful Bertie was now being dragged through the dark shades to a fate far worse than death, even than death by prolonged torture!

It was a most harrowing picture that was presented to them.

Old Ben Bancroft was lying upon the log floor of the open space that has been described; his last senses having left him with the shriek he had given, when he beheld a sight that chilled the very marrow in his bones—a sight which proved, beyond doubt, that his darling Bertie was lost, perhaps forever!

The shock had been a terrible one to the old ranchero.

That which caused him to faint away in his despair, and the just arrived trio to be almost overcome with an agony of soul that filled them with the most fearful apprehensions, was the sight of poor old Auntie Sue, crawling over the floor, in the direction of Bertie's apartment.

The old cook's head was terribly cut and bruised, blood flowing freely over her sable skin. She was upon her hands and knees, her face turned downward, and her kerchief of many brilliant colors gone.

Auntie Sue noticed not anything or anybody, but slowly crossed the log floor toward the room of her young mistress. Straight through the doorway she went, heading directly for the bed, under which she and Romeo had been hidden.

There she sunk, beneath the couch, apparently unable to articulate, or even to cry out.

Like some mortally wounded animal, that instinctively seeks some dark thicket, to breathe out alone, and in solitude, its last breath, so the poor old woman sought covert beneath the curtained couch; thus showing that she had yet retained sufficient sense to realize that there was still a hiding-place left.

To Bill and Frank the condition of Auntie Sue was apparent.

They knew that no information could be gained from her.

Both were, for the moment, stunned by the evident fate of Bertie and Dancing Fawn.

They had not the least doubt that the angelic maiden, and the beautiful young squaw, had been captured; that they were now in the power of the Apache spies, and were being carried, through the shades of the Rio Medina, toward the camp of Lone Wolf!

But, instantly, as the thought that she was now dashing toward the ranch, unknown to the red captors of their loved one, hope arose in their breasts.

The stoical face of Chiota betrayed no unusual emotion, although none could doubt that he felt deeply. Yet in that, to him, terribly torturing moment, he forgot not the cunning and strategy that was second, if not first, nature to him, nor the peril that threatened the home of his white brothers.

This will now be shown.

"Come on, pard Frank!" yelled Bandera Bill, frantically. "Marker Mose, defend the ranch as long as you can, and then ride for life!"

"Chiota, Frank, and I will rescue Bertie and Dancing Fawn, or die in the attempt. Come, Frank! We'll take father along with us."

"Mose, hide poor old Auntie Sue in the thickets. She must not be left to the mercies either of those fiends or the flames."

"Good talk, Bill. Heap good talk," said the chief, quickly. "My white brothers go in bush, go quick. Chiota come soon. Find Bertie. Find Dancing Fawn. Kill, scalp heap Apaches. It is good."

Without a moment's hesitation, Bill rushed forward, followed hastily by Frio Frank.

The young Texan grasped the senseless form of the ranchero, and dashed in haste from the ranch into the shades.

"Come," said the Creek, with a gesture to Marker Mose, and then pointing to the hideously disguised Black Buzzard. "Take up on top log-lodge. Apache see. Think heap bad medicine. Mebbe so no shoot fire-arrows."

"That's a sharp idee, Chiota. Here, Bud,"—to one of the cowboys, all of whom were at their posts at the loop-holes—"gi'n us a lift."

"I hates ter tech ther condemned dirty cuss, but hit may be a hefty good thing fer we-uns when ther hellyuns 'roves."

Bud leaned his carbine against the logs, and sprung to the assistance of Mose and Chiota; the latter pointing to a wide stairway that led up into the loft.

With much difficulty the disguised Indian was carried up, and then placed upon his feet outside, upon the flat roof of the veranda.

The chief then cut out a small portion of the

bear-skin that had covered the face of Black Buzzard; sufficient to enable the tortured Apache to have the use of his eyes, and to breathe with less difficulty.

They then rapidly descended, when the Creek thus spoke:

"Marker Mose shoot quick, shoot fast, when Apache come near. Wait see eyes, then shoot. Heap whoop. Heap yell. It is good Chiota he go on trail. Save Bertie. Save Dancing Fawn."

"Streak her on ther jump, pard Chiota, an' resky ther weemin! Dang ther ranch an' ther nags! They ain't woth shucks ter ther life of one o' ther weemin, an' we'd all skute on ther trail ef thar'd be any good in doin' hit."

"Reckon yer'll hear a heap o' noise afore soon. Ther condemned coyotes hev gut a tough job ter sarcumvent ole Mose an' ther boyees, an' run off ther nags, er burn ther home of ole man Bancroft—bat yer sculpl!"

"Skute! An' may yer git on ther right track, which I hain't no doubt yer will. Ther good Lord ain't goin' ter 'low ther painted hell-yuns ter gobble up an' tortur' ole man Bancroft's leetle golden-hair'd gal!"

But the Creek chief was within the shades before Marker Mose, who was fumbling for his "nigger-head" tobacco in his bullet-pouch, had finished his, for him, lengthy speech.

Tearing off a huge quid, Mose passed the plug to each of his pards, who, with thanks, helped themselves to the weed liberally.

Mose next passed around a canteen of whisky, also—dealing out these refreshments in the opposite apartment.

Poor Auntie Sue was carried in a blanket, and secreted in a thicket adjacent to the station of one of the guards, and near the corrals; she being given a drink of liquor, and water being poured over her wounded head, with all the kindness and solicitude of those who had enjoyed her skilled cookery for many a day.

But the old negress only moaned, her eyes expressing no consciousness of her surroundings and condition. This deepened the fury of the honest and brave cowboys against the cowardly red foe, and instilled in them a greater thirst for revenge.

Marker Mose, in fact, became furious, when he saw the sad condition of poor old Sue, and thought of the capture of Bertie and Dancing Fawn; and, in the rage, hate, and defiance that ruled him, on his return to the ranch with his pards, he yelled:

"Boyees, sling thet or'nary sneakin' skunk of a 'Pache, what Chiota shooted an' sculped, right up hyer in front, whar ther hellyuns kin see ther corpus when they 'roves."

"I'm b'ilin' over wi' ole he mad—I am! An' thar's goin' ter be a hefty sprinklin' o' death-yells when ole Marker Mose gits his shooter spittin' fire in reg'lar biz style."

"I hed a hefty score ag'in' ther cussed coyotes afore, an' I'm goin' in fer blood an' ha'r now, yer kin jist bet. Whoop ther greasy cuss up, boyees an' skute inside lively, fer I kin smell ther breathe o' Lone Wolf!"

The dead Apache spy was soon hung up by the neck, with a lariat, the slack of which was secured to an iron ring in the veranda, directly in front of the open space in the building. There, the hideous object swayed slowly back and forth in the dim light, which was now only that given among the shadows by the pale silvery moon.

There, too, upon that veranda roof, staggering about, was the bear-like nondescript, with no fore-paws, but with a sufficient length of legs to make up for that deficiency.

There it was, with a fresh scalp pinned on with thorns to the top of the head; the long hair hanging, blood-stained, far below the beaded belt that sustained medicine and paint-bags, and the still squirming moccasin snake secured about its neck—altogether presenting a spectacle that few would have cared to look upon.

The skin imprisoned Apache floundered about, here and there, along the veranda roof; his black eyes, glaring from the hairy screen with insane longing for drink, his breath agonizingly laborious to draw, and his blood fairly boiling within the thick prison of hide, hair, and fat.

And, below him, swayed his dead and scalpless comrade brave, hung by the neck.

Silence, with the exception of the usual sounds of the night, ruled the bend, and Bancroft Ranch.

Silence, except the noise produced by the uneasy movements of the horses and mules, had full sway in the neighborhood of the corrals.

But, ere long, that silence was doomed to be broken, that quiet scene to be transformed into a perfect pandemonium!

CHAPTER XI.

SUCCESS OF THE SPIES.

WHITE OWL and Beaver Tail were the sole survivors of all the spying parties that had been sent down the Rio Medina to find out the location of Bancroft Ranch, if we except Black Buzzard, who was now utterly helpless, and whose life was a burden to him.

When the two first-mentioned young braves tore through the thorny undergrowth, frightened nearly out of their senses at the strange and terrible monster they had seen in the thicket—Black Buzzard in his involuntary masquerade—they stopped not in their wild flight until the river barred their further progress.

Then they cowered in the bushes, peering out in the direction from which they had come, both panting with exertion, and scratched and torn by the thorns.

"Heap bad medicine," at length grunted White Owl, in a guarded manner.

"Ugh!" was the only remark made by Beaver Tail, both still breathing laboriously.

Then they squatted, silent and still, for some time, evidently pondering on the situation.

Little thought they that Black Buzzard, who had been terrified to such an extent by them up the river, had himself served, though unwillingly, as a bad spirit to frighten them when they most needed to have their wits about them. Truly, the tables had been turned.

But there were influences at work, born of the ponderings of the two young warriors, that were to force them on to act toward the accomplishment of the object they had in view, even though they must run great risk of life in so doing.

"White Owl go back camp. Beaver Tail go back camp. Lone Wolf heap mad. Cut off ears. Say, go to village, sweep lodge for squaws."

"Squaws spit in face White Owl. Spit in face Beaver Tail."

Thus asserted the latter brave.

"No captive, no scalp, no go to camp," returned his comrade, decidedly.

"Have captive, have scalp on belt, look Lone Wolf in eye. It is good."

"Squaws of enemies there," pointing east through the timber along the course of the river. "Bad medicine there," pointing toward the south, and the timber line to the west of the ranch.

"Come. Find squaws. Heap good captives for torture. White squaw got heap good scalp for shield of Lone Wolf. Hair shine like sun. It is good."

"Ugh! It is good," agreed Beaver Tail.

With knives between their teeth, the pair of hideous demons crawled along the river-bank, glancing keenly on every side as they went.

Again the merciless evil Fates seemed to rule at Bancroft Ranch, for ahead, fluttering downward, evidently from the branches of a huge tree, the watchful Apaches saw a small, narrow blue ribbon!

From the instant they saw it, both of the red spies were confident they had happened upon the very tree, within the branches of which the squaws of their foes had been placed for safety.

But they knew well, that Dancing Fawn, the squaw of Chiota, the Creek, was with the white maiden and the old black squaw, that the Creek squaw was brave, and skillful with weapons, and that therefore they would be obliged to proceed with great caution.

With the utmost possible stealth, the two young Apaches went on, keeping within the thick undergrowth as much as was possible, and worming their way toward the gigantic tree. But eyes as keen as their own were watching from the branches—the eyes of Dancing Fawn, who, in a very short time, had become warmly attached to Bertie Bancroft.

The latter had at once striven, upon becoming comfortably settled in the perch which Frio Frank and her brother had so skillfully constructed, to allay the fears of Auntie Sue; for the poor old negro woman was in a most unenviable frame of mind. Finally she lay passive, and then Bertie strove, to the best of her ability, to arrange her own sadly-disheveled hair; and it was while thus occupied, that the tell-tale ribbon fell, and was wafted, by the breath of the evil Fates, clear of the dense vines and mosses, thus betraying its fair owner into the hands of the same enemies, from whose power, the skill and bravery of Frio Frank had, but a short time ago, delivered her.

Bertie had, at that time, considered that her capture by the Apaches was a fortunate affair; notwithstanding what she had suffered while bound to the mustang, hopeless and despairing. She felt that this had given her the opportunity of seeing Frio Frank in his daring charge upon her red captors.

It was then that her whole heart had gone out to Frank, and his to her, when the death-howls of her captors followed the reports of the avenging revolver of the young Texan.

She felt that, had they met in the usual manner, and been acquainted for years, they would not have known each other's natures so thoroughly as the experience of those few moments enabled them to do.

It had been a trying moment to the young girl, when she left the ranch, and her father and brother so abruptly and unexpectedly upon reaching her home after passing through such dangers; but, upon parting from Frio Frank and her brother, in the tree—they to return, and meet the savage foe in deadly conflict, and she, perhaps, never again to meet them alive—this had been terrible.

But Bertie had borne it bravely.

To return, however, to our trail.

Previous to the dropping of the ribbon, the keen

ears of Dancing Fawn had detected a suspicious rustling of the bushes, but a short distance from them; and, not wishing to alarm Bertie, she pretended that she was going to steal out upon the limbs, and collect some more moss, to form a softer reclining-place.

The maiden was reluctant to have Dancing Fawn thus absent herself, even for a short time; but the Creek squaw glided away noiselessly in the darkness.

Dancing Fawn made her way down the tree, about half the distance between their perch and the ground; when, to her utmost concern, she discovered the ribbon fluttering through the bar of moonlight. She was almost confident that the two Apache spies, whose trail Chiota had discovered, were in the near vicinity of the huge tree, and she was correspondingly alarmed.

Indeed, the young squaw was so deeply concerned and apprehensive in regard to the safety of her white sister, that her emotions detracted somewhat from her usefulness as a guard. Knowing that their lives probably depended upon not creating an alarm, she kept as still as the grave.

The two Apaches practiced all the skill and cunning of which they were masters—White Owl remaining in the thicket, near where the ribbon had reached the earth, while Beaver Tail circled stealthily around the huge tree to the opposite side.

Confident that their intended victims were among the branches, the last-named warrior glided, noiselessly as a snake, and soon, to his great joy, he detected, in a line with himself and the same ray of moonlight that had revealed the fluttering ribbon, the fillet-bound head and long, flowing hair of one who, he felt certain, was Dancing Fawn.

Her position, away from the white squaw, indicated, that she must have at least suspected danger; and she might now, at any moment, change her position, or be warned, by some movement of his, of his presence.

Thus reasoned Beaver Tail, and he hesitated not a moment.

Taking a wad of buckskin, and some cords of the same, from his pouch, he stole forward, and grasping the young squaw by the throat, thrust the wad into her mouth. Then jerking her arms behind her, he bound Dancing Fawn, who, for once, was completely dumfounded. The gag was then secured in place by a cord tied around her head.

This was accomplished by Beaver Tail, without causing any noise to alarm those who were still in the tree; but White Owl detected the disturbance, and sprang to the assistance of his red comrade.

A lasso, which White Owl produced, was fastened around the young squaw, and she was lowered to the ground. The two braves then climbed cautiously up the tree.

Neither Bertie nor Auntie Sue dared speak, and both of them were worried in mind in regard to the absence of Dancing Fawn. They were expecting the Creek squaw to return each moment—indeed, they were praying mentally that she might—and the slight disturbance caused by the two Apaches was believed by them to be made by their friend.

They were about to whisper her name, when they were almost paralyzed at finding themselves clutched roughly, gagged and bound, and then lowered through space to the earth.

Upon reaching the ground, the Apaches realized that they had more than their hands full with three captives, and thinking they might need the cords they had used in binding the black squaw to secure the limbs of the others, should they be forced to halt and secrete themselves, White Owl dealt poor old Auntie Sue a blow on the head. This felled her to the earth senseless, and the cowardly savage believed that he had slain her.

Poor Bertie heard the sound of the blow and the fall, and endeavored to cry out, believing that her last hour had come—that Auntie Sue had been brained—as did also Dancing Fawn.

The latter, however, was confident that she and Bertie would be reserved for torture, or for a worse fate; but she was far from being helpless of escape. Indeed, when she found that there were but two of the Apaches, she at once endeavored to stretch the buckskin cords that were about her wrists, whenever she could do so, bringing all her strength to bear upon them with that object.

But White Owl and Beaver Tail knew they were not safe a minute while they remained near the tree, and yet they feared to advance up the river, lest they should be detected by Chiota, or possibly again encounter the "Bad Medicine."

They therefore forced the captives to stand up, and then to walk before them to the more dense thickets by the river-bank.

When they had proceeded thus to within view of the water, they perceived quite near the bank a jam of drift-logs, but they could detect no hiding-place amid the same, that was of sufficient size for them all to occupy.

Assured, however, against discovery for some little time to come, White Owl presently returned to the tree, to ascertain if the black squaw, whom he had struck down, had any arms upon her person; but he came back in great haste to startle and alarm his comrade-brave with the intelligence that the black squaw, whom he had supposed to be dead, was gone!

At once the two Apaches proceeded to bind the ankles of their captives, thus insuring against escape.

Then they rushed back to search for the black squaw, for well they knew she would, could she speak, give the alarm.

Nothing that the cowardly pair could conjure up was more to be dreaded than this.

If it were done, the terrible Chiota and the invinci-

ble Texan scouts would be at once in search of the captured squaws, and on their trail.

For some time the two braves continued their search, but without success; for, as we have seen, poor Auntie Sue, in a dazed state from the fearful blow given her by White Owl's hatchet, had crawled back to the ranch.

There, although unable to speak, she had, by her condition and appearance, revealed to the inmates the state of affairs, quite as plainly as words could have done.

The search by White Owl and Beaver Tail, for their escaped negro captive, was brought to an abrupt end by a violent crashing among the branches and bushes in the direction of the entrance to the bend. They concluded that the black squaw had given the alarm, and that the terrible avengers and rescuers were now dashing toward them at headlong speed.

And, indeed they were; for soon the two young braves heard the mad rush of Bandera Bill and Frio Frank, who had left the senseless form of the old ranchero secreted in a thicket, and were now speeding to the rescue of Bertie and Dancing Fawn.

Both Apaches, instantly shot, at terrific speed, and with dread terror, direct to the side of their fair captives; feeling sure that they had a short respite, as they reasoned that the pursuers would rush in the first place to the tree in which they had placed the females.

In a moment, the ankle-cords were severed, and Dancing Fawn and Bertie were jerked to their feet. Then, as it occurred to the Apaches that every step taken within the bottom-land would be braving death, the drift of logs which they had previously noticed flashed upon them as a means of escape; but not in the same manner in which they had previously speculated upon it.

They gave utterance to but few words, and those low muttered ones of consultation, as they entertained this plan of escape.

The captives were forced over the logs, to the outer edge of the drift-land, where, not without difficulty, however, two of the logs were detached, and floated free from the current-formed raft.

In an instant, both Bertie and the young Creek squaw were clutched firmly, the first by Beaver Tail, and Dancing Fawn by White Owl. The savages plunged with their captives under the logs, and then held their own heads, as well as those of the two females, above the water, on the opposite side of the log from the bank—for it was there that danger threatened them.

In this way, grasping the stubs of broken limbs for support, each floated independently down the silvery surface of the Rio Medina; leaving no trail that could possibly be traced by night, and then only to the bank by the shore side of the drift.

This would leave the trailers in ignorance as to whether the Apaches had gone up or down the river, unless their eyes were sharp enough to perceive the fact that two of the logs had been detached; and, even then, although they would know, they could not follow.

Neither could they know on which side, or at what point a landing had been made; thus necessitating a long delay, and a thorough inspection of both banks.

From these reasonings, the two young braves felt safe, could they pass but a short distance around the curve of the river; and proud, indeed, were they when this was accomplished, and no indications of pursuit had been detected.

Fully twenty feet apart were the two logs, Beaver Tail with his Indian captive being behind; but, as soon as he deemed themselves safe from discovery, he fastened the arm of Dancing Fawn by a thong to a projecting stub, to relieve himself from sustaining her. Little did he suspect that, through the water having soaked and stretched the buckskin bonds, the Creek squaw had freed her wrists, and was even now awaiting an opportunity to secure in her grasp a knife that she had concealed in her bosom.

Dancing Fawn had vowed, by the spirits of her fathers, that she would rescue her white sister, and she meant to keep her vow.

CHAPTER XII.

THE REPULSE FROM THE RANCH.

MARKER MOSE was stationed at the front of the building, on the east end, and consequently this enabled him to catch a view of the expected war-party before any of his pards; and greatly surprised was he, when the scene suddenly changed.

As he gazed south, through the neck of the bend, he could see a triangular portion of the plain, away to the horizon line, and which was now flooded by the silvery moonlight. While he thus looked, there shot into view none other than the negro boy, Romeo, upon the same mustang on which Mose had assisted in binding him.

Although a full quarter of a mile away, Mose could see that the little fellow's hands were held low in front, and he felt sure that they rested on the boy's pet and favorite, the ugly little dog, Chunk.

Close behind Romeo, lashing their mustangs with hissing and circling quirts, on dashed the horde of Apache warriors, Lone Wolf at their head.

It was a wild and savage sight to behold.

Last flew the hoofs of the panting steeds through the grass and flowers; the black eyes of every brave seeming to be bent straight ahead at the little negro, and scanning the line of timber in front of them—the stream, and the timber-line below the bend, swerving somewhat to the southward.

Instantly Marker Mose comprehended the situation, and he expressed his admiration and astonishment, in an ejaculation:

"By ther bleed o' Crockett an' his pards!"

"What's ther racket, Mose?" asked one of the cowboys; "air ther ha'r-tarers struck ther bend?"

"No, Bud; dang an' double dang hit, man—jist take a peep this-a-way! Ef ther little nigger, Romeo, ain't white, clean through, I'll chaw b'lied owls an' buzzards fer feed es long es I linger on this yearth! Jist gaze, will yer?"

"He's 'scaped bein' tortur'd, ter lead ther hell-yuns hyer; an' he's guidin' 'em clean past, er I'm a Greaser! But he must know, ef they gits a sight o' ther ranch, they'll split his head fer tryin' ter run 'em on ther wrong course. By the jam-up Jericho! Ef he does go under, we-uns orter sock up a monerment over his grave—thet air, ef they leaves 'nough o' his leetle carkiss ter plant."

"Thar! By ther eternal Moses, I know'd hit, Bud! Romeo's a-goner! Ther hollyuns hev see'd ther ranch. Now look sharp, an' plant lead every time inter red meat. Hyer they come on a reg'lar stompede, an' chuck full o' cussedness!"

"Whoop-er-rah! I'm hyer, Lone Wolf—me, Marker Mose, with a bullet ready fer ther buck what strikes leetle Romeo's brain-box!"

It was, indeed, very evident, that the young negro had been compelled by the Apaches to guide them to the ranch; for, as their spies had all been slain, they did not know the location of the home of the Texan, whose cattle dotted the eastern plain, and whose horses had been driven from the prairies, as they knew, and doubtless corralled.

When Romeo had been galloped away with into the Apache camp—he and his little dog fastened to the saddle, as has been described—it created the greatest astonishment in the minds of Lone Wolf's war-party.

In the first place, the boy was black; and they tried to remove the supposed paint, being astounded when they found this to be impossible.

His strangely-shaped features also puzzled them, and his curly wool as well; also the presence of the dog, and the fact that both boy and cur were secured to the mustang.

Again, the animal, upon which he was fastened, was the same beast that Chiota had stolen from them, and on which he had made his escape.

From these observations, the Apaches decided, not only that the black lad belonged to the ranch which they wished to find, but that those whom they so hated, and had resolved to kill or capture, hated this boy, or they would not have bound him on the stolen horse, and sent him up the river, thus insuring his capture and death.

This, of itself, was sufficient to decide the Apaches to give the black boy his life.

The arrival of Romeo delayed the war party for some time, for Lone Wolf strove in vain to gain information from the lad. After this, he informed him, that he would send him on as a guide to the war-party; telling him that he would be watched and slain, did he not guide them aright.

Previous to these words of the Apache chief, Romeo had been more dead than alive; but, as soon as he saw there was a chance for him, he forced down his fears and readily agreed to the proposition of his savage captor.

The little slave gained partially the control of his reasoning powers; he having been helpless from terror, from the time that the mustang had resisted his feeble efforts to turn him toward the east, and Castroville, from the bend—from this time his dread and horror had increased, until he saw the worst, and stood in the Apache camp.

Then Romeo thought of those who were at the ranch, and vowed that he would die before betraying them—before guiding the savage horde to the bend, to murder, scalp, burn, and torture!

Much good reasoning did the lad employ.

He knew that the Apaches must be aware that the ranch was but a few miles down the Rio Medina, and that he must lead them on the direct course to it; but going at a gallop past the entrance to the bend, trusting that none of the war-party would observe signs of civilization.

If even the ranch should be discovered, Romeo felt that he would not have sacrificed his life in vain; for the war-party would also be seen by some of the people there, and they would be prepared for defense. In any event, he knew that his life was of little importance, in comparison with the lives of his mother, his beautiful young mistress, and his kind and indulgent old and young masters. Thus the noble-minded boy reasoned.

A complete revolution had taken place in him, both physically and mentally.

His strength returned, and he petted the head of Chunk—the dog looking wistfully and wonderingly up into his face.

In much the same degree and direction had the dog changed, as had its little master; the manner and actions of both impressing the Indians strongly.

The start was soon made, and on that long gallop, with that hideous horde behind him, escape impossible, and death staring him in the face, Romeo's resolve to do all in his power to prevent his home from being discovered—or, at least, to give them every chance to prepare for defense—never, for a moment, weakened.

On went the Apache war-party, until nearly at a point where the ranch would be invisible, and the trees on the east side of the entrance to the bend blend with those on the west side. Then Romeo was startled by a piercing yell, and the snort and prancing of mustangs.

One of the Apaches had discovered the ranch! The bronzed arm of the brave was extended straight from his shoulder, his finger pointed toward the bend, and the signal yell shot from his lips.

One hasty glance revealed this to Romeo, who had not slackened the speed of his animal.

Then he plunged the blade of his knife into the

ham of the mustang, having first cut himself free; but, at that very instant, Lone Wolf shot forward, fury in his hideous face.

Up rose the chief's powerful arm, as his steel plunged forward, and down upon the head of the little negro came the tomahawk! But the plunging of his animal caused a miss stroke, and the side of the hatchet came down, instead of the edge of the blade, as intended.

Like an arrow from a bow the mustang, as the knife of its boy-rider pierced its ham, flew forward and it dashed frantically east, maddened with pain from the stab, and affrighted by the charge of Lone Wolf.

A fierce and threatening round of frantic yelps came from Chunk as Romeo fell forward upon him, his blood raining both upon the horse's head and upon the dog, and spattering the grass and flowers. The little negro clutched desperately at the saddle-born, retaining his hold even when unconscious.

The Apache chief whirled his steed about the instant he struck the blow; perhaps, in his mad rage, believing that he had, as he intended, split the head of the lad in two.

Not a sound signaled the approach of the savage horde to Bancroft Ranch. Since losing such a number of their braves, some of whom had been scalped by the detested Creek, Chiota, and having their captives taken from them in a manner so humiliating to themselves—since this, the only thought in their minds had been that of revenge, and they stole stealthily to seek it.

Not a sound came from the bend. Not a sign or trace of human beings greeted the eager eyes of the Apache demons, except a strange, black figure, that stood upon the veranda roof of the ranch.

Nearer and nearer rode the Apaches. Instantly, from all came a vengeful yell, blood-curling in its intensity.

They had observed the swaying form of their comrade-brave, Red Elk, who was to have brought information in regard to the location of the ranch.

The sight of him now, dead and senseless, stirred the vengeful passions of the paint-bedecked demons to frenzy. They reached the entrance to the bend, and the whoops of war shot simultaneously from every throat.

But as the echoes died away in the dark shades, every jaw-strap was jerked, and the braves exerted their utmost strength to bring their steeds to a halt. Soon the hoofs of the mustangs were pawing the air, snorts of pain proceeding from the beasts.

Every eye was fixed on the veranda roof.

The strange and unnatural object, heretofore still and motionless, had begun to stagger back and forth on the roof's edge.

No sound like those now uttered by it, had the Apaches ever heard.

Nothing bearing any resemblance to the thing itself, had any eye in that savage land ever before beheld.

An object more calculated to create superstitious terror in the breasts of Apaches could not well have been produced. Chiota had gotten up a masterpiece in the shape of the ludicrous and the terrifying. He would have enjoyed his success now could he but have seen it.

Even Lone Wolf sat speechless in his saddle. His eyes were fixed upon that awkwardly staggering and unnatural thing, the jaw-strap of his mustang held as stiff as a bar of iron, proving his dread of advancing further toward the dwelling.

Then spurts of flame came from the shaded walls of the ranch, beneath the veranda roof—a terrific report of many carbines, fired as one, roared through bend and shades. This was followed by another volley from the branches of the trees, on the east side of the bend; while, at the same time, off from the roof of the veranda, sprung the "What-is-it?" rolling over and over on the sward.

It, however, accidentally gained by this motion and violent exertion, a standing position.

Death-howls, yells of agony, the human-like screams of wounded mustangs, and rallying signals, all sounded, with hellish intonation, from the midst of a perfect whirlpool of madly-prancing, rearing and snorting steeds!

Some of these were riderless, others with demoralized Apaches striving to extricate themselves from the wild confusion.

"Bad Medicine" had done it!

With one terrific howl of terror, all now lashed their mustangs, and disappeared in the timber, to the west side of the bend; leaving their dead and dying to be scalped by their enemies, and that in spite of the loudly-reared commands of their furious leader, Lone Wolf.

CHAPTER XIII.

FRIO FRANK TO THE FRONT.

It would be useless to attempt to describe the feelings of Bill and Frank, after a fruitless search, beneath and around the tree in which Bertie, Dancing Fawn, and Old Sue had been secreted. Frio Frank did not dare trust himself to think of the awful possibilities connected with his darling's fate, as a captive.

"Great Father in heaven!" the young man cried out, from his innermost soul, as, dashing his clinched fist against his forehead, he, by a superhuman effort of will, banished the remainder of the partly-unspoken thought; for each following word would have pierced his brain, like hot arrows of barbed steel.

Frank knew that the daylight must come before the trail could be traced; and what might not happen, during the long night that was before them, to that angelic girl?

She might die of horror and despair before the morning!

But, would there ever be another morning?

All seemed deeply dark, black in the future—no more light for him.

When Eric Frank descended from the tree, springing recklessly from the branches, neither Bandera Bill nor Chiota were near; and, being so tortured by his anxiety, and the forced inactivity toward rescuing Bertie, the young man rushed at terrific speed along a cow-path, down the stream. Some incomprehensible, strange, and mysterious influence seemed to force him onward, without, as it appeared to him, his exerting himself in the least.

His limbs flew fast, apparently moved by their own volition, and he strove neither to halt nor to return, although he was positive that the Apache demons could not have taken their captives down the river.

Just the opposite, indeed; for, reasonably, they would have gone up-stream toward their camp.

At that moment the terrific whoops of the war-party, as they charged toward the ranch, rung and echoed through the timber with fearful power and intonation; yet not for an instant did the young Texan halt, but fairly flew over the ground, the bushes against which he brushed whisking like the hissing of maddened serpents.

Frio Frank felt that he must be going mad!

His spirit seemed not to have the least control of his body, but to be outside and away from it—flying in the air and gazing pitifully down upon its recent tenement—while that tenement, his body, was being forced forward by some influence which appeared to have no form.

Yet, as he in spirit gazed ahead, he could distinguish a vapory cloud, that gradually dissolved itself and then resolved into a shape that was angelic—a something with long, flowing, golden hair—hair like Bertie's!

Frank strove to call out, thinking that the angel shape would turn its head and reveal its face, but his tongue clove to the roof of his mouth.

He gasped and panted alternately, his eyes still fixed upon the vapory form that appeared to hold such strange influence over him, that forced his controlling spirit from his body and forced that body to follow, when slowly he saw the gold-crowned head turn. First the temple, then the cheek and chin, then the profile became visible, and last, the full fair face, the angel face of Bertie Bancroft became revealed—but instantly vanished!

At the same moment, Frio Frank shot through space, through the darkness, beyond which he caught a glimpse of moonlight upon the silvery, slow rippling river; and the next, with a wild plunge, he dashed beneath the dark waters!

Down the Rio Medina floated the two logs, supporting both the Apache abductors and their victims—the beautiful Bertie and Dancing Fawn.

The young squaw of Chiota, with every sense strained, awaited the opportunity to draw her arm in front of her and secure her knife. Her anxiety was terrible, for she feared the Apache would examine her bonds and thus ascertain that she was free, before she had the chance she so longed for. At length, however, the grand opportunity arrived.

It was at an unexpected moment, and was occasioned in an unexpected manner. Indeed, the surprise it gave to Dancing Fawn nearly lost her the opportunity she so desired.

They were now floating slowly along. All was still on the banks and in the dark shades, except the usual but not frequent shriek of panther and hoot of owl; and the barking of numerous coyotes, on the plains beyond the timber, being also occasionally distinguishable.

Such was the situation when, up the stream, sounded the war-whoops of the Apaches, as they dashed toward Bancroft Ranch.

As a matter of course, the two young braves naturally turned, and looked behind them, greatly excited, and with not a little pride and exultation. This, however, was much lessened by the combined reports of many rifles, close followed by another volley.

The keen-eared Apache abductors could distinguish the death-whoops of their comrades, amid the pandemonium of sounds that followed; and they became greatly anxious and concerned. So much so, indeed, were they, that it is a question whether they thought of their captives.

During this providential abstraction, Dancing Fawn succeeded in clutching her knife, and returning her arm to its former position; but she dared not attempt to use the blade, as the other Apache would observe her, and thus all would be lost. The greatest caution must be hers.

Fortunate was it that the young squaw was thus considerate.

But thus, some further time passed, they still slowly floating down the river when, signaling each other, White Owl and Beaver Tail proceeded to exert themselves in forcing the logs nearer to the south bank, by swimming with one arm and both legs.

Some time passed in this way, when suddenly a far sounding plunge, as of some heavy body shooting from the high bank into the water, broke on the air quite near at hand, but within the shaded portion of the river.

At once the alarmed Apaches ceased swimming, and raised themselves up to gaze over the log, and then did Dancing Fawn act.

The moment she so desired, had arrived.

Cutting the cord that bound her right arm to the log, she changed the knife to the hand that was free, whirled in the water, and grasping her captor by

the hair with her left hand, she plunged her blade to the buckhorn in his side!

At the same instant, with all her strength, she jerked him down beneath the water, to prevent the death-howl. Then, to save herself from being seized, the young squaw grasped a stub of the log, and forced herself upward. In this way she kept nearly the length of her form above the surface of the waters.

It was a terrible struggle, but the Creek squaw had sinews of steel, and her blade had struck home.

It was also a terrible moment for her, as she could not see either Bertie or the other Apache. She began to fear that the latter had discovered what had transpired, and had killed his captive.

Therefore Dancing Fawn loosened her grip before Beaver Tail had ceased his struggles; but she was satisfied he was beyond causing further trouble, and casting loose her feet, she regained her former position, and peered over the log.

To her dismay she beheld the other brave look toward her. But when he glanced at the water between her and the shore a heavy ripple was discernible, and Dancing Fawn saw that the Apache believed his comrade to be swimming under water to investigate at the bank the cause of the heavy plunge.

The squaw knew, however, that the wave was caused by a huge alligator-gar, quite near the surface.

The merciful Fates at this time seemed to hold the winning hand in the game once more.

Naturally the attention of the surviving Apache was directed toward the darkly-shaded waters, and Bertie, up to this time dazed with terror and despair, lifted her head above the log.

Suddenly the young girl felt her bonds cut loose, and her hand pressed by another beneath the water. Her heart sprang to her throat, nearly suffocating her with relief, hope, and joy.

The next moment a wild outcry sounded from the direction of the bank and a human head shot from the darkness into and over the silvery sheen! The huge waves on either side testified to the herculean strength that had been exerted by the frantic swimmer.

At the same instant that this cry sounded, under the water went White Owl, the Apache, as if his legs had been caught by some monster!

Then followed a boiling of the waters and Bertie felt her ankle clutched.

With a loud and piercing screech that was horrible to hear, her golden head also disappeared!

Then, from the mouth of the strong swimmer from the bank came another cry in which his whole life and soul seemed to go out; yet he spurned the waters, his broad shoulders surging above them at every powerful stroke.

Then the scene changed.

But such a change!

First, up slowly came the head of Dancing Fawn beside the log, and feebly her hands closed about a stub on the same—she seeming exhausted nearly to death.

Then uprose beyond the log the black hair and the paint-daubed face of the hideous Apache.

Near it and in fact supported by her savage captor, appeared the form of poor Bertie.

This the strong swimmer—none other than Frio Frank—beheld, and dashed the waters madly from him.

Then up in the air darted a sinewy-bronzed arm, the arm of the Apache, the hand clutching a long knife, upon the blade of which the silvery moon gleamed. The bright steel was poised above the gold-crowned head of Bertie Bancroft!

Downward on its course, the glittering steel started, when, with a great surge of the waters, two arms shot upward, a hand of each caught the arms of the savage, and down with a savage yell that was smothered by the waves went White Owl, the last of Lone Wolf's spies!

And down also went the head of the captive maiden.

The silvery waters bubbled and boiled, and then became tinged with blood.

Again appeared the head of Frio Frank, but, with a groan of anguish, he sunk down once more beneath the waters.

Ere long, however, two heads were seen, close together.

One was that of Bertie Bancroft, the other that of Frank Forbes.

But what a sight!

The beautiful girl is unconscious.

With his very soul in his eyes, which are fixed upon the pallid face of his darling, Frank swims toward the bank, with one arm clasped around the form that was more dear to him than life.

His breath comes and goes in a manner that shows great exhaustion, for his efforts have indeed been herculean, and his anxiety and mental torture almost beyond the power of man—indeed, beyond the power of many men.

And the young Creek squaw, with a great joy and relief at her heart, beholds her white sister in the saving and protecting embrace of Frio Frank, the maiden's God-sent lover; and the Indian woman, who has again proved that she is a warrior's equal in war, swims slowly after her two Texan friends.

In two minutes more, Frio Frank, with Bertie in his arms, and Dancing Fawn beside him chafing the still senseless maiden's wrists, is sitting upon the bank beneath the dark shades, but the hearts of the young man and the squaw are light, while relief and joy are reflected in their eyes.

Bertie Bancroft has been saved from a fate far worse than death.

No longer is the strange, mysterious influence that urged him down the river a mystery to Frank.

He believes firmly that he saw in a vision the face and form of Bertie, beckoning, and then forcing him down the Rio Medina to the rescue of his darling.

He had, as he emerged from the waters into which he had plunged so abruptly, beheld the golden head of Bertie above the log, and his exertions to rescue her had been most heroic.

Again is Bertie Bancroft safe, and again Frio Frank is as happy as mortal can possibly be on this earth.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE WOUNDED IN THE WOODS.

It will be remembered, that Auntie Sue was sequestered in a thicket near the corral, her wounded head bathed, and whisky administered; then she had been left, unconscious of her condition, or of what was going on around her.

Not long did the old negress remain thus.

She arose and staggered stealthily through the shades, unperceived by the cowboy, who were then momentarily expecting to hear the war-whoops of the Apaches.

Slow progress, at first, did poor old Sue make; but, as the fearful cries of the war-party rung through the air, she threw up her arms, and ran as she had never run before, down the cow-path.

On and on she rushed, a most pitiable sight to behold; the thorny branches tearing her scant clothing, and scratching her flesh. Her eyes were fixed ahead, as though she beheld some bright land, where safety awaited her from the red demons, who had so terrified her, and torn her young mistress from her side.

These fiends were, doubtless, now murdering her old and young masters, and destroying their home!

All this was dreadful.

But one thing had she to be thankful for; and that was, that her boy, Romeo, had escaped the terrors of the bend, and must now be safe in Castroville. His ride had proved of no benefit to her and the people of the ranch, but his departure had probably saved his own life.

For a long distance did Auntie Sue rush through the shades, until, before her, they grew brighter; and then, with increased speed, she rushed forward, until she came into a natural "open" in the timber, and into which the bright moon poured a flood of silvery light.

Then she beheld a sight that loosened her tongue, and banished the numbness that had caused her brain to seem as lead.

She uttered a piercing shriek.

Never before had the poor old woman been so racked to the very soul with a guish.

Why?

There, upon the carpet of grass and flowers, in the bright moonlight, his arms extended upon the sward, lay Romeo, his head and face besmeared with blood. While, lying flat upon its little black master's breast, was Chunk; occasional whines coming from the ugly, but faithful and affectionate cur.

As the cry left Auntie Sue's lips, she came near falling to the earth, her muscles becoming weak, and her speed much slackened. She staggered forward, and fell by the side of Romeo and Chunk, her bleeding head upon the arm of her boy, and one arm thrown over his neck!

There lay the slave mother and her son, both senseless, tattered, and blood-stained; while Chunk again barked, with doleful impatience, evidently realizing that it had more to attend to, than ought justly to have been put upon it.

No mere words could express the depths of the emotions that were Bertie Bancroft's and Frank's, when the former recovered, under the kind ministrations of Dancing Fawn, and found herself safe, and in the arms of her preserver.

She strove not to remove herself from the embrace of the man to whom she owed more than her life. Why should she ever even think of leaving those protecting arms?

Why, indeed?

Into the eyes of the beautiful maiden poured a stream of worshiping love, from those of the brave and handsome youth, whose she was forever!

But, suddenly, with an anguish that tortured Frio Frank to the soul, Bertie cried out:

"I cannot thank you, Frank, and you, Dancing Fawn, as I ought, while my poor father—oh, my father and brother! I remember those terrible whoops now. They have been killed! Papa, and Will, and our happy home are gone—all gone!"

"Let us hope and pray not, Bertie," said Frank, rising quickly, with the maiden in his strong arms, still clasped to his breast.

"Come, Dancing Fawn! May the Great Spirit bless you, for we owe our lives to your brave and daring exertions. Let us go to the ranch at once. I still hope that all may be well, and I have good grounds for doing so; for Chiota is at the bend. Come! You ought to be hopeful of Bertie, for good angels have watched over you, and I can hardly believe that they have lost sight of your dear ones. We will soon—"

But Frio Frank paused abruptly, as a loud and piercing cry rung through the shades, evidently proceeding from a point at no great distance from them.

The Creek squaw, with knife in hand, dashed on ahead of Frio Frank, who was unable to speak, so great was his fear that some new danger threatened them.

Bertie, trembling violently, threw upward her arms, and wound them about the neck of Frank; nestling her golden head upon the young man's shoulder, as if she wished there to die—as if she gave up all of life; that dread cry having snapped

the last link in the chain of hope, and life, and love!

She closed her eyes wearily, and whispered a prayer as Frank strode forward.

No more of such horror and anguish could she bear and live.

Thus the poor maiden thought.

And perhaps the same thought, in connection with Bertie, occurred to Frio Frank; for he suddenly halted, at the border of a moonlit "open."

Within that "open" stood Dancing Fawn.

The bark of a dog, in furious and threatening anger, filled the "open."

And there, upon the sward, lay Auntie Sue and little Romeo—both apparently dead!

A pang of anguish shot through the warm, brave heart of Frio Frank.

Dancing Fawn at once stooped, a gourd of water in her hand, and dashed the cool contents over the wounded heads and faces of the unconscious pair, pouring some into their mouths; Chunk seeming to realize that she was a friend, and ceasing to bark.

Then Frank saw the young squaw stand erect, and gaze toward him.

Her hand waved gracefully, beckoning him on, and he knew that all was well.

At once he strode, with his fair burden, from the bushes, saying:

"Be of good cheer, Bertie! It is poor Auntie Sue and Romeo. They have both been injured, but I fancy not very seriously."

The next moment, Frank stood beside Dancing Fawn, and Auntie Sue, with her arms clasped about the wildly blinking Romeo, sat upright on the sward, crying out, from her inmost soul, again and again:

"Bress de good Lawd! Bress de good Lawd! My Romeo done libs, he does!"

Chiota and Bandera Bill, after missing Frio Frank, searched everywhere in the vicinity for him, but in vain. Both were greatly worried and perplexed, but eventually they decided that their pard must have set out, in a state of insane desperation, in search of the red abductors.

Knowing that it was useless to seek for "sign" of either Frank, Bertie, Dancing Fawn, or the Apache spies, until morning, they returned to the ranch in haste! going first to the thicket where they had left the old ranchero.

The latter had regained consciousness, and was seated, with a dazed stare in his eyes; his naturally round and florid face, pallid and haggard. A great change for the worse had occurred in his appearance, since he had seen, on the forenoon of the previous day, the face of the Apache spy, framed in the foliage of the trees, as he stood upon his veranda at the ranch.

Neither Bandera Bill nor Chiota believed that the ranchero had heard the war-whoops of the Apaches, or the rifle volleys; however, these last might have brought his reviving senses, by the shock, to the condition in which they now found him.

No time was to be lost, for they were needed at the ranch, which must be abandoned to the enemy, if the Indians besieged the bend. Then the whole force would go in search of Bertie, Dancing Fawn, and Frio Frank.

From the sounds, Bill and Chiota had decided that the Apaches had been repulsed; and they now wished to gain the ranch before another charge was made. Consequently, each clutched an arm of old man Bancroft; Bill saying, in a cheering tone, which he was far from feeling himself:

"Brace up, father! We'll win the day yet. The boys have given those red demons a bigger taste than they can chew."

But not a word came from the awfully-shocked ranchero, and they hastened on with him.

Upon peering out from the bordering bushes of the bend, Chiota and Bill saw that no Apaches were visible except the dead and wounded that lay opposite the ranch.

Neither was there one of their friends within view.

The Creek chief stood silent, listening to the sounds in the timber beyond the bend, and there was a look of triumph in his eyes, as he said:

"Apache heap scare. Too many guns shoot at ranch. Lose heap braves on war-path. Bad Medicine on Lone Wolf trail. Black bear with no paws, heap bad medicine."

"Mebbe so Lone Wolf want fight more, but braves heap scare, no fight. It is good. Watch Apache. Chiota's eyes sharp. When spies go to camp with Bertie, with Dancing Fawn, Chiota find trail. Chiota kill, scalp spies. It is good."

"I believe you have got things down fine, and about as they are, my red brother," agreed Bandera Bill.

"Let us go into the ranch with my father, and then scour the timber. A few can guard the ranch, if everything is as you think. I shall go wild if my sister is not rescued before morning."

"You and I must keep watch of the red demons, and prevent the spies from joining the war-party with Dancing Fawn and Bertie. It is strange, indeed, where Frank disappeared to; but I hope he has struck "sign," or discovered the Apache spies."

"Come, Chiota! I'll give a signal to Marker Mose—"

A shrill, peculiar whistle sounded from the speaker, and both he and the Creek chief rushed toward the cook's cabin; keeping between that building and the timber west of it.

A rousing cheer from the cowboys in the ranch, and also from those in the timber, assured the newcomers that all was well; and, in a minute or two, the trio dashed up the rear steps, and into the open space of the ranch.

There they were met by the cowboys, who had so bravely defended their employer's home.

Old Ben Bancroft, whose condition was no more favorable, was at once laid on the couch, and whisky administered; his head being bathed with the same.

Marker Mose reported that not an Apache had shown his ugly picture, since the entire party had lashed their mustangs into the timber, after the terrible volleys from the rifles at the ranch—those in the timber having also sent a hail of lead, hurtling through their ranks.

In addition to this, the "Bad Medicine," which Chiota had invented—the bear-skin inclosing Black Buzzard—had sprung from the roof of the veranda, rolling over and over; but had, at last, regained its perpendicular, and began staggering unnaturally, as was its appearance, on after the terrified Apaches, into the timber.

Such was the description, given by Mose, of the repulse.

"What's ter be did now 'bout ther weemin, Bill?" asked Mose.

"Half of the boys can remain at the ranch. The others of us will rescue my poor sister and Dancing Fawn, even if their infernal captors have joined the main war-party."

"There is nothing else to be done, and do this we must, and will!"

Bandera Bill had become desperate. His handsome face was now drawn, hard, and almost expressionless. His voice had an unnatural ring, and there was a strange look in his eye—a look that was most vengeful and murderous.

All this had come from his father's condition, the capture of his adored sister, and the continuous privation, and torture of mind and body, he had endured, since he had been himself a captive to the Apaches, in the Bandera Hills.

"That's a good p'gramme," agreed Mose; "but whar's Frio Frank?"

This he asked in surprise.

"Lose in woods," answered the Creek. "Mebbe so see Apache spies. Mebbe so try save Bertie, try save Dancing Fawn. Soon find Frio Frank, when go in woods up-river."

At this instant, a number of scattering rifle-reports, opposite the ranch, proved that the cowboys were dispatching the wounded; and, a moment after, one of these, from the corrals, rushed upon the veranda, and reported the absence of Auntie Sue. She was believed to be wandering aimlessly in the timber, and little anxiety was felt, as she was on the east side of the bend.

Preparations were at once made for a party, consisting of Chiota, Bandera Bill, and all the cowboys except one, who, with Marker Mose and the three Mexicans, were to remain, remove the dead Apaches, and defend the ranch, should necessity require it.

CHAPTER XV.

HOME AGAIN.

The searching-party, Bandera Bill at their head, as soon as all were in readiness, proceeded along the veranda to the end of the same, and stood gazing in the direction of the timber.

Chiota had gone, some time previous, requesting that they would await his return; as he was about to ascertain, if possible, what had become of the Apache war-party.

Fifteen of the reds had been killed, or mortally wounded, by the two volleys from the carbines of the Texans. Consequently Lone Wolf had but twenty-five remaining of the party of seventy, with which he had started out from the Rio Pecos; while not a scalp, or horse, or captive—unless the Apache spies had joined the war-party with Bertie and Dancing Fawn—had he to show.

No wonder was it, that he and his remaining warriors believed that "Bad Medicine" had followed his trail from the Bandera Hills to Bancroft's Bend. And the Texans thought much the same.

Not long had the latter now to wait.

Chiota strode from the dark shades, his feathers flaunting, and his form proudly poised.

"Apache ride fast up river. Heap scare. No like long-shooting guns. Bad Medicine on Medina for Lone Wolf's war-party."

"Good," returned Bill. "But have you seen any trace of Frank, or our lost ones?"

The reply to this came from a most unexpected source.

A shrill, peculiar outcry came from the direction of the corrals.

Bandera Bill cried out:

"Thank God! That's Frio Frank."

With these words he rushed along the veranda, followed by the others: Chiota striding upon the lawn to the front of the dwelling, and the Texans bounding from the veranda to the open, moonlit space, directly opposite the middle of the house.

Then a sight met the view of our amazed friends, which caused a rush of joy and relief to their anxious hearts. The next moment sombreros were whirled in air, and all cheered loudly.

Bandera Bill dashed, like a lunatic, to meet the new arrivals.

A group better calculated to cause the emotions that had been so extravagantly manifested, could not have been formed.

As the reader has, doubtless, decided, it consisted of those whom we left down the river; so strangely, and in so tragic a manner, brought together.

First, out from the undergrowth walked Frio Frank, with Bertie still in his arms; but he now, considerably, placed her upon her feet, while she clung to his arm.

Then, out sprung Dancing Fawn into view followed

by Auntie Sue, the latter leading Romeo by the hand, Chunk running at his little master's heels, and wagging his tail with joy at the cessation of hostilities and the general return home.

Bandera Bill folded Bertie in his arms, and the long-suffering maiden wound her arms about her brother's neck.

Old Ben Bancroft seemed suddenly to recover when he heard his daughter's name shouted out by the cowboys; for he rushed out upon the veranda, and catching sight of the tableau before him, he gave one wild yell, and dashed toward the group, tearing Bertie from the arms of Bill, and clasping her madly to his breast.

No longer was a search of the timber necessary.

The loved and lost had been found, and Bancroft Ranch, with its crowded corrals, had been saved from Lone Wolf and his merciless warriors of the Rio Pecos.

It remained now for Chiota to follow the trail, and ascertain the course that the remnant of the war-party had taken; in order, if necessary, to warn any rancheros whose homes and lives might be endangered by the now frantic followers of Lone Wolf.

Few believed that the savage chief would return to the Apache Mountains until he had, to a certain extent, avenged his reverses, and the deaths of so many of his braves; but not one dreamed that one of their own number, and who had already suffered terribly in mind and body through the Pirates of the Pecos, was destined to have his heart torn open afresh by the same demons, who were now fleeing from Bancroft's Bend—the same fiends who had once held him captive for torture, and twice had held the darling of his soul in their power!

However, there was no premonition, or warning of the future proceedings of the Apache war-party; and all our friends were happier than they had ever believed it possible they could be.

The next morning, Chiota reported that Lone Wolf was encamped in the Bandera Hills, in an almost impregnable position; and no further thought of danger from that source was henceforth apprehended at the ranch.

Dancing Fawn and Chiota made no exhibition of their joy at having met each other in safety and unharmed, after the dangers they had passed. But that was far from proving that they did not feel as deeply thankful and joyous, as if they had striven for hours to express those emotions.

As all the adventures, desperate dangers, and daring deeds became known generally, Dancing Fawn received loud spoken praise for her skill and daring, in effecting the rescue of Bertie; and the latter could not endure to have the young squaw absent from her sight, except when Frio Frank was with her.

Frank and Bertie roamed, arm in arm, until the latter was prevailed upon to retire. The same was the case with Auntie Sue and Romeo; the little ducky being greatly elated at the praise bestowed upon him.

Thus we close the second number of our series of Frontier Tales, each complete in itself, but all bearing on the lives of those we have followed through terrible trails.

And we take leave of Frio Frank and Bertie Bancroft, most happy in each other's love; the old ranchero, and Bandera Bill, his son, proud to know that their darling Bertie had in prospect a husband so well worthy of her—the noble, brave, and daring Frio Frank!

Auntie Sue and Romeo, as well as Chunk, received every attention, which all felt they had well and faithfully earned.

The day that followed, was devoted to all kinds of jollity and feasting; the cowboys and Mexicans taking part, and enjoying it to the full.

We have but to mention two facts, that broke in upon the joyous party, as the shades of night again enveloped the earth.

All were seated upon the veranda, the cowboys and *vaqueros* lounging on the lawn and enjoying their pipes, when the Creek chief, who had been absent for some time, strode down into the bend, from the plain.

Halting, with his Apollo-like form proudly poised, he said:

"Lone Wolf and braves ride fast to Rio Frio. Ride over prairie. More braves come to Lone Wolf's camp from Rio Pecos"—indicating twenty, by extending and closing his fingers—"so many."

"Lone Wolf war-path open. Want scalp. Want drink blood. Want captives for torture."

Frio Frank sprung instantly to his feet, crying out:

"Oh, my God! This is too much! It is more than I can bear. Have I not suffered enough of anguish and misery through those painted demons of the Pecos?"

"Bertie, I must leave you! My friends I must gallop at once to the Frio. My father, mother, and sister are in danger, and our home as well."

"Talk heap good. Lone Wolf ride fast. Ride fast to Frio Frank's log-lodge. Chiota, he go. Bill go. More go. Save Frio Frank's father. Save mother, sister. It is good."

"War-path open. War-cry on lips."

And, circling his scalping-knife around his plumed head, Chiota, the Creek, shot out the war-whoop of his tribe, with vengeful and exultant intonation.

All, at once became engaged in hurried preparation, at Bancroft Ranch; and our next story of this series, which will soon appear, will record the occurrences that resulted from the dash of Lone Wolf's war-party, from the Rio Medina, and which had proved "Bad Medicine" to them, to the Rio Frio.

THE END.

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